THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

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NAPOLEON SOLO • ILLYA KURYAKIN

Deep in Red Chinese-ravaged Tibet, only Solo and Illya stand between the evil of Thrush and the defense of free men everywhere — in —

THE WORLD'S END AFFAIR

EXCLUSIVE— and Complete in this Issue.

The World's End Affair

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Prologue: "Who Turned Off the Sky?"

IT WAS A splendid way to end a dangerous mission. Splendid, at least, until the jarring moment when some madman or other repealed the laws of nature. But until that moment, it was a splendid way:

First-class compartment seating. The porcelain-smile attentions of three fetching stewardesses. Iced champagne at 35,000 feet. The day was clear. The sun had a sharp crystalline brightness. It blazed in a serene, cloudless sky, and glared blindingly from the silver hide of the great jet engines of the commercial airliner.

Far below, the South China Sea glowed like a fine old painting. Mr. Napoleon Solo studied it, trying to recall what the pilot had just said over the speaker system about their ETA Hong Kong.

Solo was dressed in his usual dapper style. Except for the pieces of sticking plaster on his chin and neck, there was no evidence that he had been down on all fours the night before, fighting for his life against a pack of THRUSH uglies in a foul Bangkok slum.

One of the girls hovered, for a second time in sixty seconds. "More champagne, yes?"

"Yes," said Illya Kuryakin from the aisle seat next to Solo. He held up his glass, smiling.

"No," Solo said. His face was serious, but not his eyes.

"Come now, Napoleon. We're entitled to a bit of celebration. With that Bangkok cell -" Illya made an expressive gesture, which effectively transmitted the idea: dead and buried.

Solo smiled at the stewardess. "I just don't want to cost these sweet young ladies their jobs. I don't know what it is about you, Illya, but you do draw them."

The stewardess stared straight into Solo's eyes, rapt. "Yes. Oh, yes."

"I happen to be very thirsty," said Illya.

"All right," said Solo. "Fill us up, dear. But fast, before the other passengers notice."

He passed his glass. Immediately, several people who had been craning around to see who was getting all the attention buzzed their service buzzers. The stewardess fled as the great Air Pan-Asia jet hummed down the sky toward Hong Kong.

Solo sighed, content. "You know, Illya, l was just thinking. This is a splendid way to end an exciting -"

Up at the front of the compartment a lady screamed. The cockpit door thudded open.
Simultaneously there was an explosion, like a muffled gunshot. A man cried out.

The entrance to the sacrosanct cockpit was a confusion of blue-uniformed arms and legs. Solo's midsection chilled. He slipped his right hand beneath his faultlessly cut jacket. THRUSH had attacked in stranger places.

But even as Solo tried to untangle the visual pretzel-puzzle of struggling men in the cockpit entrance, he was bothered by the realization that THRUSH would hardly launch an attack with this sort of fanfare –

Abruptly a man came hurtling out of the tangle at the cockpit entrance. His mouth hung open. His eyes were large, round, brown. His black hair and his airline uniform were mussed. He was an Indian or a Thai, Solo judged.

Illya tensed forward on his seat, his hand now buried in his coat too. The flight officer stared, baffled, blank-faced, out over the passengers. Then his left hand flew out. He caught the curtain which screened off one of the lavatory doors.

It was not enough support. Down he went, twisting slowly. A dreadful silence had fallen over the compartment.

As the flight officer twisted around, the back of his shirt became visible. A wet, spreading color swatch stained it.

"Shot in the back," Illya breathed. The cockpit door slammed and latched loudly.

For a moment more the stunning effect of what had happened gripped the compartment. A stewardess from the rear economy compartment came running up. Two of the forward compartment girls were on their knees in the aisle beside the gunshot man.

The new stewardess ran halfway to them, saw what had happened, and fainted on top of a passenger.

"That helps a ton," Solo said grimly. "Illya?"

The slightly-built, pensive-faced UNCLE agent needed no further suggestion. Illya moved from his seat and started down the aisle. Napoleon Solo came right behind him. All at once the starboard wing of the giant jet dipped toward the South China Sea.

The Air Pan-Asia plane went into a sharp banking turn. Solo and Illya steadied themselves on the headrests of two seats.

"Changing course," Solo said. "Very fast – probably without authorization."

"An air kidnapping," Illya whispered. "It has happened before."

One of the girls kneeling beside the wounded man was going into hysterics. "Help me get her out of the way," Solo said over his shoulder to Illya. The younger agent picked up the girl bodily, deposited her on the lap of a stout, middle-aged Japanese woman who was blinking rapidly as tears of terror streamed down her cheeks.

"Help her," Illya said to the Japanese woman. "Keep busy. You won't worry so much."

Napoleon Solo was already kneeling next to the semi-conscious flight officer. The man lay on his side in the plushly carpeted aisle. He gripped the leg of the passenger seat nearest him. Solo glanced over at the other stewardess.

She was the one who had intended to serve them the fresh champagne. Thank God she was able to control herself. Her pretty Eurasian face had whitened and her hands shook, but she had a grip on herself.

"Who is this?" Solo asked. "The pilot?"

"No. Mr. Han, the co-pilot," the stewardess said.

Solo gently probed the man's shoulder. "Mr. Han? We'll try to get this plane back on course and get you medical attention." Han signified that he heard.

Illya crouched down. "Judging from the location of the bloodstain, the bullet might not necessarily be fatal. Loss of blood, however - that is another matter."

What happened up front?" Solo asked. "Han? Can you answer?"

"They - without warning - turned on me," Mr. Han breathed. "Men I have known for several years. They had - guns. Without any warning. I asked Captain Loo what was the curious - money belt affair which I saw beneath his flight jacket when - he opened the jacket. They stared at me. I knew something was peculiar - asked again. I reached for the belt, only - only curious - and they had guns -" The co-pilot's shoulders jerked as a spasm wrenched him.

"Both of them with guns?" Solo said. Co-pilot Han barely nodded. Napoleon Solo glanced once at Illya. The young agent with the mild face and bowl-like haircut pulled his flat black and deadly looking U.N.C.L.E. pistol from the concealed holster under his jacket. Solo did likewise.

"It's probably locked," Solo said, rising slowly. All at once he was moving, stepping across the wounded man. He jammed his shoulder against the

cockpit door and
wrenched the handle with his free hand.

From inside the cockpit came a low, nasty crack. Solo threw himself back flat against the lavatory wall. Directly next to where he had been standing, the cockpit door showed a small round bullet hole.

Solo whipped his head around. The passengers were crying out, weeping, hugging one another. Solo saw nobody with a wound. Had the bullet damaged the pressurization system? What were the damned fools in the cockpit up to?

"Well," he said to Illya. "We know one thing."

"Yes?"

Solo grimaced. "The door's locked."

At precisely that second, the new madness began.

The interior of the aircraft grew gloomy, as though a curtain had descended. The transformation was instantaneous, from the sun-sparkling brightness of day to murk.
The giant jet gave a lurch, another. The windows streamed with rain.

A bluish flare lit the interior. This was followed by the most shattering drum-roll of thunder Napoleon Solo had ever heard. The plane seemed to rocket upward, then drop sickeningly. Passengers rolled in their seats, side to side.

"Where did that come from?" Illya said. "Didn't" the pilot announce -?"

Solo barked. "Yes. Just before this all started, he announced perfect weather in every quarter of the sky. Not a cloud. Perfect weather." The faces of both men were drawn. Solo expressed it for both of them: "I've never known a pilot to fly into a storm deliberately."

"Unless he wanted to destroy an aircraft," said Illya.

"Maybe. But I've never seen a storm like this, either."

Solo stared past the terrified passengers. There was little to be seen. Great dark clouds boiled past. Another lighting bolt flared. The entire starboard wing seemed to glitter and dance with eerie radiance. The big aircraft shuddered. Thunder pealed.

The stewardess who had been kneeling beside the wounded co-pilot had enough presence of mind to find an emergency control of the compartment lights. She turned it on. The lights flickered briefly. There was a whine, a smell of ozone. Another loud thunderclap
rocked the aircraft. The lights went out.

Even the relatively calm stewardess began to show signs of breaking. She gripped Solo's arm.

"I don't know who you are, carrying those –" The girl's trembling hand indicated the long-barreled weapons the U.N.C.L.E. agents were holding close to their bodies. "- but if you can use them. Do something about those insane men in the cockpit. I tried to call the cockpit from the galley intercom. They have cut off communication."

"And they're apparently set on sending this plane down," Solo said.

"It can't take much more of this," Illya said.

Napoleon Solo sensed this was true, felt it with each great heaving of the great jet. The wings groaned. The compartment ceiling creaked. The ozone smell was increasing as the ventilation system failed. A seam slowly widened in the compartment ceiling, suddenly buckled open for a good eight inches of its length. Up above the paneling there was a display of blue, shooting sparks.

"Are we in a typhoon?" Solo asked the stewardess.

"Wrong season. And such violence at this height? I've never known it -"

"There's something diabolical about it."

Solo's head banged against the lavatory wall as the plane gave another sickening buck-and-drop. "The storm came up too fast, all too fast. Almost as though somebody threw a switch -"

The moment the words were out of his mouth he felt foolish. It was impossible to control weather that way.

An ill-defined, crawling sensation gripped him. Illya's fingers on his arm pulled him back to reality. Already the jet engines had acquired an odd, low-pitched sound, full of ominous groanings.

"Napoleon," Illya said, "we hardly have time to stand around beating our gums. There are two men in that cockpit intent on destroying this plane in this storm, whatever the motive. I suggest we suspend meteorological discussion and do something."

Solo said, "Right." He bent down, tapped the heel of his left shoe.

Its surface slid partially aside. He palmed a small, dough-gray pellet. He kicked his heel on the rug to re-seal the closure. Then, ducking low, he headed into the narrow aisle leading to the cockpit door.

He could hear nothing from the other side of the door. The roar of the storm, the sound of the aircraft shaking itself apart were too deafening. He jammed the doughy pellet against the cockpit door and leaped back, shoving the stewardess to one side.

Illya had already jumped the other way, gun up, ready. He and Solo had worked together long enough to need next to no communication in times like this.

With a boom louder than the thunderclaps the door blasted off its hinges. Acrid smoke billowed into the compartment. Solo barked, "Now!" He and Illya jammed into the narrow aisle and went through the smoke into the cockpit.

Act I: Green Is The Color Of A Deadly Place

The Cockpit of the Air Pan-Asia jet afforded little room for maneuvering. Napoleon Solo lunged through the smoke and found himself practically up against the pilot's chair.

Illya came crowding in behind him. The two men at the controls turned, rising up. Their faces were distorted out of the bland patterns of composure which Solo typically associated with flight crews on Oriental air lines.

The pilot was the more squat of the two, a heavy-framed, short man whose brush-cut black hair sparkled with sweat-drops in the dim green gloom of the instrument-lined chamber.

The pilot's lips peeled back. His pudgy right hand had a pistol in it. He aimed at Solo's stomach. The airliner bucked and plunged upward. Solo's squeeze of the trigger seemed to take an eternity.

Outside the front cockpit glass, oily black clouds boiled toward the aircraft and went whipping away past the radar nose. Time seemed to slip into slow motion. The trigger finger of the pilot went white, whiter –

A double crack as the pilot fired and Solo did too. Something ripped the shoulder of Solo's jacket. Behind him, metal clanged. From the lavatory, there was a splintering of glass. The pilot crumpled.

The flight engineer had swiveled round in his chair and now had a snub-nose small-caliber gun pointed at Illya's head. As soon as Solo fired, he whipped his right hand over. The muzzle of his pistol came chopping hard onto the flight engineer's wrist.

The snub-nose gun made a noise. Illya jerked to one side. He aimed at the flight engineer's left shoulder and shot once.

In seconds the duel had begun and ended. Solo's chest ached from the smoke, his stomach from the nauseating tossing of the cockpit floor under him.

The storm burst around the great jet in eruptions of lightning. Some of the explosive smoke had cleared away.

"Drag them out of their seats!" Solo shouted. It was necessary to shout. The storm noise was a continuous tympani roll from the sky. Passengers screamed. The engines whined; sparks from short-circuited wiring back in the passenger compartment crackled a sinister warning.

The flight engineer lay on the cockpit flour. Blood from his shoulder seeped into the ridged channels of the flooring.

Illya pointed his gun muzzle at the plane's control panel. "What do we do about those?"

Approximately seven thousand lighted dials with eccentrically jerking needles seemed to confront Napoleon Solo. One glance told him that he would never be able to fly the aircraft. A two-engine executive jet which U.N.C.L.E maintained on Long Island was his limit, and he had only piloted that a few times in emergency situations.

"I might be able to take it over," Illya yelled above the roar. "But only if the weather weren't so bad, and we could contact a control tower to talk me through the procedures -"

The pilot and the flight engineer out of action made the situation look hopeless. Solo wished he had not been so prompt to shoot. But would either of the renegade officers volunteer their services if they could, even at gunpoint? He doubted it.

Solo peered back through the murk into the passenger compartment. "Stewardess! Is the co-pilot awake?"

"Barely, sir. You had better come find a life belt, because we we will surely go down in another moment."

"The devil we will," Solo replied. "I've got an insurance payment to make next Tuesday. Get a bottle of your champagne and pour it down Mr. Han's

throat. Tell him that Blue
Cross will take care of him in Hong Kong, but right now he's got to fly this plane."

"Napoleon," Illya said, "you are impossible. Perhaps that is why you so often accomplish it."

Solo's mouth whitened at the edges. "Do you think I think this is hilarious? I'm trying to keep the few people who are still sane on this plane from tearing each other's throats. Unless we can get out of this storm -"

Like punctuation, another crackle of lightning burst outside the rain-flooded windows. The immense jet tilted downward, with the tip of its port wing pointing toward the South China Sea. The stewardess had gone stumbling back along the aisle to the galley. Solo met her over the prostrate form of the co-pilot.

Mr. Han's eyelids flickered open and shut. He seemed to realize that he was needed. He tried to lift himself on his right elbow.

Kneeling, Solo propped him up. He tossed the champagne bottle to Illya, who thumbed the cork. A white foamy squirt sprayed across a couple who were silently praying.
Solo tried to keep everything else out of his mind except the necessity to prop up Mr. Han and get the bottle to his lips. He could feel the accelerating downward plunge of the plane in his viscera.

Han swallowed the champagne in great gulps. "Instant courage," Solo said. With his help Mr. Han lurched to his feet. The back of his uniform was bloody from shoulder to belt. Solo and Illya helped him forward to the cockpit.

They settled Mr. Han in the pilot's chair. He groaned, swayed. Then he jerked himself to attention and blinked at the controls.

Later, Napoleon Solo decided that they probably would have crashed had he not remembered something Mr. Han had said about Captain Loo's odd looking money belt. Solo left Han staring blearily at the controls, unable to

comprehend them because he was having enough trouble simply keeping upright in his seat. Illya tried to steady him as Solo crouched in the semi-darkness of the instrument-lit cockpit

The flight captain's eyes were rolled far up in his head in death, shining like little, moons. Something shiny-black gleamed beneath his flight blouse, where the bottom two buttons had come unfastened.

With shaking fingers Solo undid the rest of the coat buttons. He fanned back the pilot's lapels. Around his middle Captain Loo wore what indeed looked like a fat money belt of tough black vinyl. Solo prodded the belt.

Solid. As though a number of small steel units like cigarette cases had been sewn inside the vinyl carrier. Solo's hand brushed across something hard which protruded from the unit located at about the position of Captain Loo's right hip.

Experimentally Solo felt around bit more. The device, which he could not see in the extreme shadow behind the pilot's chair, felt like an ordinary wall-switch.

Under his breath Solo said, "Here goes probably everything," and threw the switch over to the opposite position.

What happened in the next half minute left Solo and Illya slack-jawed.

First the pelting rain seemed to lessen. The violent down and updrafts buffeting the airliner grew less formidable. In a matter of fifteen seconds they stopped altogether. The thick black clouds began to shred apart. It was all so fast that it beggared belief.

Napoleon Solo stared at Illya. Illya stared back. Both of them stared down at Mr. Han.

The co-pilot was talking to himself in what sounded like Thai. He had a sick, pained grin on his face. He had touched two controls, two switches, thrown them, and the aircraft's response had been satisfactory.

Han raised his head. He started. "What has happened to the storm?"

Ahead of the radar nose, blue sky appeared, then the tilted horizon of the South China Sea. The maelstrom vanished behind. Sunlight flooded into the cockpit.

Now Illya could see what Solo had been doing down on the floor. He spotted the toggle device. Mr. Han let out a modest whoop, coughed violently, recovered, and repeated his question about what had happened to the storm. This time there was near-hysterical happiness in his voice.

In reply, Illya said, "I believe Mr. Solo has switched it off."

The full impact hit Solo. He stared down at the vinyl belt wrapped around Captain Loo's thoroughly dead midsection. He said, "My God in heaven."

Mr. Han was finding his way out of his pain daze and into the routine of disaster procedures for the giant jet. The emergency and fire systems soon controlled the worst of the damage. Three engines were operating at full power. Mr. Han shut down the fourth and the plane began to fly steadily again through the untroubled blaze of sunlight and sea.

Under Han's direction, Illya operated the radio. Soon they had ghostly voices from hundreds of miles away to help them. In the passenger compartments, the general hysteria was being controlled by more champagne.

Solo lit a cigarette and sucked the smoke deep. It would have been a relative piece of cake the rest of the way to Hong Kong if his gaze hadn't been pulled back time and again to that mysterious series of steel cigarette-case units around the dead pilot's waist.

Solo wanted to experiment. He wanted to throw the switch back again. He didn't. Why push for trouble?

They would have it in quantity, once that black belt reached New York and made its damnable, diabolical presence felt at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

Two

Three days later there were several peculiar occurrences in a certain nine square block area in Manhattan's East Fifties.

The news media reported them. The commentators closed their broadcasts with them, usually making a joke. The United States Weather Bureau was powerless to explain them.

The peculiar occurrences were a series of black, furious rain showers accompanied by thunder, lightning, and high velocity winds. Each storm lasted five minutes or less.
The storms encompassed only nine square blocks.

But it was hardly a coincidence that the affected area contained an unbelievably modern complex of offices and research facilities concealed behind a front of decaying brownstones.

Within this complex, in the laboratories manned by scientists of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, tests of the black belt were going on. On a 24-hour priority alert basis, U.N.C.L.E. was attempting to ascertain an answer to the question, What hath THRUSH wrought?

High up in the chamber with the motorized revolving conference table, the planning room for U.N.C.L.E.'s Operations and Enforcement section, three men tried to pry loose some additional pieces of the puzzle from a reluctant fourth.

Mr. Alexander Waverly looked hale and well rested, although he hadn't slept in thirty-six hours. Solo and Illya both looked hung over.

Solo's fine linen shirt was rumpled and gray. Illya sat with his feet up on a desk, a vitamin pill in his hand. He tossed the vitamin pill up and caught it, tossed it and caught it, while Mr. Waverly tapped his forever unlit pipe

against the sill of the window overlooking the panorama of the East River and the United Nations Building.

Solo had been doing the questioning for the past quarter hour.

"Your name is Chee," he said. "Alfred C. Chee. We know that. We have a file on you. You're not a Thai, you're Chinese. You were with the Reds for a while after the takeover. Then. later, you joined THRUSH in nineteen sixty-two as second echelon supervisor for the Ranjiranji cell. But apparently your pilot's training was too valuable. The last listing shows you were transferred to Strategic Logistics and Operations. Listen my balky friend -"

Solo grabbed the shoulder of the man seated stiffly in the straight chair. "It's all on the computer and your undistinguished, not to say disgusting, face is on our microfilm.
Now we've got food and you haven't. We've got cots to rest on and you haven't. So you'd better start talking."

Mr. Waverly cleared his throat. "I might also remind our guest, Mr. Solo, that when more civilized methods of interrogation fail, we have chemical agents designed to immobilize the will and liberate the tongue."

"He means," said Illya, "we'll stick you with a needle. You'll betray THRUSH anyway. Why not get it over with? You've stalled long enough."

"Thirty-six hours," Solo said. "I'm getting damn sick of it."

"Temper, Mr. Solo," said Waverly.

"Temper, hell. We've gotten nothing out of this fourth-class Fu Manchu since the flight from Hong Kong landed. I vote to skip the drugs and try something ethnic, like bamboo shoots under the nails. Mr. Waverly, we can't waste days and days exchanging pleasantries. This man and his machine almost killed a planeload of people."

The man in the chair was the flight engineer of the Air Pan-Asia jet. He had been given a clean pair of trousers, shirt and other clothing. U.N.C.L.E.

physicians had dressed his shoulder wound with fresh bandages. He looked ungrateful and slightly truculent over the whole business. He was a slender, sallow-skinned Oriental in his middle thirties. His lips were compressed primly. His black eyes shone with that fleck of fanatic resistance Solo had learned to recognize as the hallmark of the captured operative of THRUSH.

"Talk," Solo said.

"My name," the man said, "is Flight Officer Hiram Wei. I am so listed on the personnel roster of Air Pan-Asia Incorporated. My flight officer's certificate shows that I was born in Canton in 1929, of an English mother named -"

"Stow it," Solo interrupted. His face was red with fury. He'd had more than enough.

Mr. Waverly gave his pipe a final knock against the marble sill. A pastel phone rang. Mr. Waverly walked past the giant, light-flecked face of the huge computer and answered.

"Um. Oh. Ummm." He took an experimental chew at the stem of his pipe "Very good, Rolfe. Expect you in an hour. What? That big, eh? Remarkable, remarkable. Yes, I saw that particular newscast. I gather the Mayor was rather upset about the unexplained weather phenomena you fellows caused in the neighborhood. Can't be helped, can't be helped. Thanks, Rolfe. Appreciate the extra hours and all."

Mr. Waverly hung up, swung round.

"That was the laboratory," he said, primarily for the benefit of the THRUSH agent. "We have concluded our initial tests of the components of the device discovered aboard your plane. While we waited for our laboratories to finish the preliminary phase we had a certain latitude in this interrogation. Now I'm afraid we must begin to put the parts together, and rather quickly. Will you talk?"

With composure the flight engineer regarded his hands folded in his lap.

"My name is Flight Officer Hiram Wei," he said. "I am so listed on the -"

Mr. Waverly sighed, a sigh befitting the heavy decisions which fell to a man so highly placed in U.N.C.L.E's policy and operations section.

"Obviously drastic measures are required."

Illya said, "I have a nice set of brass knuckles which I confiscated in Athens"

Solo grinned. "The knuckles, Mr. Waverly?"

"The drugs, Mr. Solo."

Three

Three hours later, Solo, Illya and Waverly waited in a short, aseptic corridor.

The corridor was situated one flight below the planning room. Dim, hooded little bulbs burned along the baseboards in either direction. At either end the corridor ended in double swing doors. It resembled a wing of a private hospital which, in fact, it was.

Solo pinched the bridge of his nose. He glanced at his watch. Illya stood across the hallway. In his right hand he held a drum of magnetic recording tape. Abruptly the swing doors to the right opened.

A long grotesque reflection was cast out ahead of a rubber-wheeled hospital cart. The attendants in white pushing the cart seemed to take forever to wheel it down to the door where Solo impatiently was jigging from one foot to the other.

"Are you having some sort of internal upset, Mr. Solo?" Waverly asked. He appeared exhausted. Pouches showed under his eyes.

"Well, sir," Solo said, "it is getting late. And there's this girl, sir. Her name is Bernice. A charming thing. She'll only be in Manhattan one more night. Since we've already heard the tape of what Chee said while he was under the drugs, I thought maybe we could wait until tomorrow to pursue this matter."

Mr. Waverly knocked his pipe against the wall. "No, Mr. Solo. We are going to proceed from here to the audio-visual conference room."

"Oh." Solo sighed as the cart squeaked up on its big wheels. "Bye-bye, Bernice," he said under his breath.

Waverly spoke to the physician attending the cart: "Dr. Bailey, how soon will Mr. Chee recover?"

The physician glanced down. Under crisp sheets, Alfred C. Chee, flight engineer, lay asleep. The doctor said, "He should be out from under most of the fog in an hour. Will you want him again?"

"In the audio-visual conference room, under maximum guard," Waverly nodded.

"I'm afraid the questioning didn't pull much out. Obviously he didn't know enough to be useful."

"On the contrary, on the contrary," Waverly said, dismissing the cart. It rolled into the gloom of the small, neatly-furnished recovery bedroom. Waverly enjoyed the looks of puzzlement on the faces of Solo and Illya. He said, "Come along, gentlemen. You may think the tape we made of Mr. Chee's babbling was worthless, but you are not in possession of all fragments of the mosaic. I have one more bit to add, in the audio-visual room. Until today, I confess I didn't know what to do with it."

Illya said, "About all this tape contains is the information that Alfred Chee was a THRUSH agent placed on station eighteen months ago in his cover post as a flight engineer. He was based in Hong Kong and told to wait. He received his first orders only one week ago Friday."

The elevator doors opened. Solo thought one last time of Bernice and followed the others inside. As the doors closed he said, "But Illya, that does reveal one other thing, sort of by implication."

Illya hooked up an eyebrow. Solo continued: "It indicates the priority THRUSH assigned to the testing of the weather control apparatus. Chee was to get into place, hold his cover and, apparently, let nothing else disturb it pending the test. Last week he finally received the components - the switch belt which Captain Loo, also of THRUSH, was to wear around his waist, and the black generator box we found stowed in Chee's luggage when the plane landed at Hong Kong."

The elevator doors opened again. The men moved down a long corridor walled in stainless steel. Recessed ceiling lights blinked blue, amber, red, in signal patterns. Through an open doorway a teletype chattered. A girl spoke into a microphone.

"But actually, the sum of our information is that THRUSH has perfected a dreadful weapon," Illya commented" as they entered a large room off the corridor.

Shutting the door, Mr. Waverly said, "Well. Mr. Kuryakin, thank you for grasping that point. Perhaps it will lessen Mr. Solo's concern about his cancelled amours."

Waverly swung round beside a highly polished board room table. "I believe it is quite apparent from the report which Rolfe brought to us, just before we followed Chee into the operating theater, that an enormous peril is posed by this new discovery of THRUSH research. Control of the weather is a weapon ruthless men have dreamed about for centuries."

"I understand the danger," Solo said. "Under the cover of a man-made storm like the one produced from the jet, a cadre of THRUSH people could move in and take over virtually any city in the world. There'd be no defenses. People would be too busy finding cover, caring for their dead and wounded, trying to prevent looting -" Solo's voice trailed off. Pictures of the possible carnage flicked in his mind like images thrown by a slide projector. None was pleasant.

"We must discover the source of this THRUSH breakthrough," Waverly said. "How far along is the development of the device? Does the mission of Chee and Loo - which was to be a suicide mission if necessary, as Chee revealed under the drugs - represent an early test? What will be the next test? An entire city? Is every THRUSH satrapy now equipped with such a generator? Or if we locate and wipe out the research unit, will we have cut off the rooted tree before it grows to full size?"

Waverly cleared his throat. "We must operate on the assumption that the generator is a research project only. We will prove the truth or falsity of our theory only by locating the research center responsible for the machine."

Waverly turned to a console. He pressed one of many colored studs. A rheostat began to reduce the light level. Soundlessly, an ultra-wide screen descended from the ceiling on the far wall. Illya slouched in a deep leather chair, smoking. Solo paced.

"About that damned generator itself, sir -" he began.

"You heard Rolfe's report."

"Yes. They're sure downstairs that the generator will produce violent weather on command, but they're not sure how yet."

Waverly nodded. "Rolfe is wary of using destructive testing to analyze the components, the belt and the black generating box found in Chee's luggage. Since those are the only samples we have, tearing them apart must be done with utmost caution."

"That also means it will be some time before the laboratory people discover a way to counteract the ion reversal which Rolfe thinks is at the heart of the process," Illya said.

"Um." From the underside of the gleaming table, Waverly took small microphone from a carrier receptacle. He pressed a button beneath the tiny mike grid. A red light on the wall glowed. "Stand by to let me have the aerial photos, will you, Jacques?"

There was a disembodied, "Right, sir," from a concealed loudspeaker.

"I have brought you two here," Waverly explained, "to offer you the one additional piece of the mosaic which is in U.N.C.L.E.'s hands. It came through while you were returning from Bangkok. We routinely receive unusual aerial reconnaissance material from the various governments banded together lo support U.N.C.L.E. What you are about to see was culled from a batch I received while you were on the other side of the World.

The photos were taken by an aircraft similar to the American U-2. It was flying a routine patrol mission. Normally the weather in the region photographed prohibits clear photography, which is why views like these have never shown up before. Now the only other facts Mr. Chee revealed on that tape which Mr. Kuryakin is holding were what again?"

Solo frowned. "He didn't know the man who brought the weather equipment and the sealed orders to Hong Kong."

"But the man was a THRUSH agent, " Illya said. "He knew the code."

"He was Oriental," Solo said. "This may tie in later."

Silence. Mr. Waverly sucked on his pipe stem.

Illya said, "Isn't that all?"

"Is it?" said Waverly.

Furrows formed on Solo's forehead. Then he remembered. "Chee's contact mentioned a rough flight. And something about Nepal, I think."

"Nepal," murmured Waverly. Into the mike again: "The photos, Jacques, please."

A series of full-color aerial shots slid one after another across the screen. There was an oval area in the center of each photo. The area glowed darkly

green. It was surrounded by sharp, brown-and-slate topography, splotched here and there with white.

"A valley," Illya said, "And a very fertile one, from the looks of it."

"Surrounded by - that can't be!" Solo said. "Those are mountains with snow on them. No valley so green could exist at such an altitude, so close to such big peaks." Solo turned toward Waverly. "There must be some distortion, sir. The valley must be far below those mountain tops."

"On the contrary," Waverly said. "Photo analysis confirms that the peaks and the bottom of the valley are less than a quarter mile apart."

Illya snorted. "A fertile valley at the snow line? Where on earth -"

"In Tibet," said Alexander Waverly.

Solo jumped up so hastily he dropped his burning cigarette on the carpet. He snatched it up, talking all the time: "These photographs were taken over Tibet, Mr. Waverly?"

"To be specific, Mr. Solo, over the Himalayan mountain range, the highest mountains in the world. Cold, frozen mountains. Of course no fertile valley could exist at that altitude, Mr. Solo. Unless, of course, one could control the climate."

Mr. Waverly thanked Jacques on the microphone, re-hooked it beneath the table and tented his fingers. The rheostat brought the room light up to normal again. "I expect the significance has dawned on both of you by now."

"The THRUSH contact's reference to Nepal -" Illya said. "Nepal adjoins Tibet."

"But Tibet is in the hands of the Red Chinese!" Solo said.

"Quite right," Waverly agreed. "Do you suppose that would make any difference to THRUSH? They have sold out the worst as well as the best in their insane determination to build a supra-nation. Why not operate in Tibet

if it suits their purpose'? Perhaps they have recruited some Chinese assistance. Why is that so unrealistic? The fanaticism of the Chinese would fit perfectly into their scheme of things.

"In fact, I can think of few worse adversaries than a Communist Chinese who has renounced his old masters and joined the intellectual monsters who control THRUSH. Most civilized people consider the Red China the most destructive and imperialistic nation in the world today. THRUSH makes the Chinese look like kindergarten toddlers by comparison."

Solo swallowed. "'What's our move?"

"To try to send agents along the route from Hong Kong to Nepal, and thence into Tibet."

A chill descended. Solo's backbone crawled. Penetrate Chinese-dominated territory and discover a THRUSH outpost? The peril would be exactly doubled. Before he could comment, Waverly went on:

"That's my purpose in having this man Chee brought back here as soon as he recovers. We will place him under the control of our hypnotic compounds, so that he will be amenable to whatever we suggest. We will buy him a plane ticket to Hong Kong. You two gentlemen will be on the next plane. We will let Mr. Chee be seen in his usual haunts in the Crown Colony. Before very long, I imagine, there will be THRUSH agents sniffing after him, to find out what went wrong with the aircraft test.

"After all, THRUSH cannot have gotten a very authoritative report. They cannot know fully how the flight turned out, since we managed to neatly quash any reference to the storm in the Hong Kong newspapers. They should be most anxious to contact Alfred Chee when he reappears. When that happens, you two gentlemen will follow those who contact him."

Napoleon Solo was about to say something sardonic. High up on the ceiling, a bank of square, previously dark inlaid panels flared red and began to blink in sequence.

Illya jerked his head up, staring at the blood-hued lights.

A hidden loudspeaker barked, "Immediate red alert! Immediate red alert!" A siren began to warble. Waverly snatched up the mike.

"Give me the Central Board." A pause. "This is Waverly. Where's the trouble?"

"The medical wing," came a voice. "Unexplained explosion. All primary communications systems have been knocked out. We're trying - hold on, here come the backups."

"Plug me in with the wing," Waverly ordered.

Solo and Illya tensed by the door, checking over their long-barreled pistols. There was another rattle of noise. As the back-up communications systems cut in, the audio-visual room filled with an amplified confusion of voices crying out in pain. Solo heard fire crackling, sirens warbling, walls collapsing. Waverly shouted for Dr. Bailey. Finally he answered:

"Here - here, sir; Chee woke up. The search units missed one thing. He had a high-intensity explosive cap on one of his teeth. He used it to blow half this floor to pieces the minute we left him alone. We thought he was still sleeping it off."

"Are you all right, Doctor?" Waverly said.

"Yes. Two of my interns got it, though. Killed by the blast. There's fire everywhere, but the sprinklers are on. We'll make it. The prisoner's loose."

"In which direction?"

"The express elevators leading to the basement level."

Illya snapped the slide on his pistol. "Let's go, Napoleon. If Chee discovers the underground channel leading to the motor launch dock at the East River, we've lost him."

Both men charged out of the room.

"Waverly!" came Dr. Bailey's voice. "I heard that. Tell Solo and Kuryakin to be careful. I'm willing to bet that if the prisoner had onetooth with an explosive cap, he had at least one more. Two is usually standard for THRUSH agents."

Under the blinking blood-colored lights, Mr. Waverly looked wan.

"It's too late, Doctor. They have already gone."

Four

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin raced through the corridors, pistols drawn. Other
U.N.C.L.E. agents, responding to the red alert, crisscrossed the halls, then disappeared behind stainless steel doors which shut and sealed themselves and would not open again until a specified signal removed the alert.

Out of breath, the two agents reached the express elevator bank. Two sets of doors were recessed in the wall. Solo pointed to the indicator board above the closed doors.

"That one's in the basement already. If the alert signal had come a second or so sooner, we could have caught him between floors. Use your keys on the over-ride board, Illya."

Illya was already at work. He inserted one key and then another into the silvery-dull cover of a metal box set in the wall between the elevators.

Tumblers rattled faintly. The cover sprang open. Illya threw a toggle within the box.

At once the indicator lights above the right-hand elevator began to wink. The over-ride system had restored power. Within a few more seconds the men were riding downward again.

Neither spoke.

Finally the elevator stopped. Solo and Illya flattened against the side walls of the car, pistols ready. The doors opened.

Illya slid forward to the front of the car. He shifted his long-snouted pistol to his left hand. He used his right to press a button which locked the car doors to full open. Solo peered around the edge of the opening into the hallway.

In most respects the corridor resembled the one they had just quitted, stories above. The walls shimmered and reflected each other like dull steel mirrors. Recessed light banks, but fewer of them, blinked every dozen yards in the ceiling. Not so many doors opened off this corridor. And there was a faint but pervasive scent of salty, open water.

The corridor was empty.

"He must be down here," Illya said. "Each floor is sealed during an alert."

"He's here," Solo whispered back. "I'm getting the message from my spine. Let's go."

Solo's neck prickled as he and Illya stepped into the tomb-like hall. Like perfectly oiled machines, one of them whipped around to the left, one to the right. They swept the gloom with the muzzles of their pistols.

The doors of the other elevator stood open. Bright fluorescent light washed out over the concrete floor. But the car in which Chee had ridden down was also empty.

They began to walk. Their footfalls clicked and echoed, eerily. The ceiling lights flashed blue, amber, vermilion, coloring their faces with harlequin patterns. Solo licked his lips. A feeling that they were being watched increased.

His scalp tingled. His belly felt tight. Somewhere, in this corridor their quarry waited, hidden. The ceiling angled downward as they rleached the

halfway point between the elevators and the massive steel doors which led to the underground quay and the private channel.

Illya's eyes ranged the corridor. "This is impossible, Napoleon. All the doors are sealed, the elevator is empty, and no one has gotten through those steel lovelies blocking the exit to the river." He craned his head back to stare at the ceiling. At this point it was barely three feet above their heads. "I don't see where our elusive friend could have got to, unless he ascended to heaven as a cloud of ectoplasm. I would have sworn -"

Barely whispering, Solo said, "Quiet. He's watching us. From that vantage point you mentioned. Don't turn! Keep staring at the river doors. Something just registered. At the place back there where the ceiling began to slope, I noticed a patch of shadow on the floor. One of those light bays in the ceiling is out of commission."

Illya's eyebrows quirked up, understanding. Each of the bays consisted of three large, square panels set in a line across the ceiling from wall to wall. Still playing the game of pretending that his interest was centered up ahead, Solo went on, "The only trouble is, we told him which way is out."

"But he has no over-ride keys," Illya said. "And he can't possibly be armed."

Sweat trickled down the back of Solo's neck to his collar. "You're right. We'll take him on the count."

Slowly Solo whispered out the numbers. On the spat-out three, both agents turned. Instantly Solo spotted the dark ceiling square which his subconscious had only noted before. Repair crews had apparently pulled all the wiring guts from the center light box a few yards back. The translucent cover which fitted into the frame flush with the ceiling was gone. Up in the barely man-sized space recessed into the ceiling, a shadow stirred –

"Chee?" Solo called. "Chee, you haven't got one chance. Get down, or –"

A shrill, ear-hurting shriek made Solo start. The THRUSH agent had been wedged up into the recess, using the pressure of his backbone and his heels

to hold himself in concealment. Now he let out another wild scream as he dropped. He tumbled on the concrete, sprang up. Solo knocked Illya's rising arm aside:

"Don't kill him! His hands are empty -"

Strictly true. But in spite of this, Chee was not behaving like a trapped man. He had his fingers in his mouth, pulling and yanking at his teeth as though one ached. Then his spittle-shining hand whipped out from between his lips. There was a wild, crooked grin on his face as he threw hard.

The two U.N.C.L.E agents dodged instinctively. Something small and white whizzed past them, and pinged against the great steel doors. Instantly, deafening sound, raw heat, gouts of fire and billows of smoke swirled around them.

The explosion's force hurled Solo against the corridor wall. Chee stumbled, off balance, keeping up that maniacal, demoralizing shrieking. Chee pelted past them through the smoke, which was already beginning to leap and swirl as fresh currents of air struck it.

The salty aroma of the East River washed over Solo as he jerked Illya along in pursuit.

Alfred Chee had already leaped over the wrecked remains of the great doors. His shoes clicked rapidly out in the darkness.

Solo and Illya could see little. The underground channel which led in from the East River under an arched concrete tunnel opened into a far larger, tear-drop shaped basin at this end. Three to four powerful motor launches were customarily anchored there. Only one at a time could pass from the tear-drop through the narrower channel. And the channel's river end was being blocked now. The explosion had activated other alarms.

As a metallic squawk came raucously from a speaker overhead, a grille of thick iron bars descended at the channel's far end. It was visible to Solo because its pattern stood out against the city lights on the river's opposite shore.

Somewhere in the dark down by the tear-drop marina there was a clunk of feet hitting decking. Then a heavier slosh of water as one of the fast launches' took the sudden weight of Alfred Chee jumping aboard.

Solo ran to the left, out of the jagged frame of light created by the ruined doors. Illya followed. They flattened against the concrete wall, listened.

Water lapped out by the launches. Chee laughed. It was a low, unpleasant sound, smacking of lost sanity.

"We have to rush him," Solo whispered.

"I can't see a thing except those lights on the river," Illya said.

"Hang on for a second. Your eyes'll adjust."

"I hope he doesn't have another of those exploding molars conveniently fastened in his head. If he threw one right now, we'd be two very -"

A white spot of light bloomed out by the marina. It widened, blasted Solo's eyes with its glare. Suddenly Illya and Solo were circled in brilliance. Chee had found the spotlight on the launch.

Solo leaped out of the light, zigzagging wildly as he ran. Illya went the other way. The spotlight whipped back and forth wildly, searching for them. Finally it hit Illya, and stayed on him.

Then the thing which Solo feared happened. The THRUSH agent discovered the swivel-mounted machine-gun mounted near the spot.

A stuttering roar filled the dark. Tracers left orange trails as the bullets ripped the wall in the center of the spot-lighted circle. Illya had thrown himself face forward just in time. Now he leaped up, started to run. The spotlight swiveled. The machine-gun stuttered evilly. Illya wrenched out of the way again, wincing as cement dust driven up by the bullets stung his eyes.

Chee was operating the searchlight with one hand and the machine-gun with the other, Solo guessed. He started a reckless run forward. Illya was jumping back and forth like a madman. The light followed him.

Solo poured on the speed, heedless of how much noise he was making. Shielding his eyes at the quay's edge, he made out the shape of another launch moored between the quay and the launch from which Chee was firing. He tensed, jumped, landed on the nearer deck
with a thud. Chee heard the noise.

Around came the searchlight and the machine-gun muzzle. The searchlight blinded Solo. He used his thumb to set the pistol on automatic fire. The gun bucked and barked in his hand as he fired into the heart of the light and kept firing, moving his aim slightly to the right.

Glass broke. The searchlight element sizzled and sparked and went dark. Alfred Chee screamed.

In the echoing confines of the secret marina, the machine-gun noise lingered long after the gun itself had stopped. The weapon swung gently on its upright mount, creaking.

Solo and Illya jumped aboard the second launch a moment later. Illya produced a pocket torch. He shined it down on Chee's blood-flecked shirt, then up to his lifeless face. Chee's mouth was open. Two of his teeth were noticeably shorter than those alongside.

"Mr. Waverly won't be happy about this," Solo said.

"Mr. Waverly was not down here the last few minutes."

"Well," said Solo, though he sounded rather dubious, "I guess you have a point. But I wouldn't bet on it"

The interior of the U.N.C.L.E morgue was chill, blue-lit, uncomfortable. Solo shivered. Mr. Waverly dropped the white sheet over the corpse of Alfred C. Chee.

An attendant rolled the slab back into place and latched the locker door. Mr. Waverly's breath clouded as he said, "His death is regrettable, though I suppose you had no alternative. But now it is impossible to execute our plan to have you follow his contact route from Hong Kong. Therefore -"

Mr. Waverly sighed. "Yes, I'm afraid you'l1 have to take the more dangerous route into Tibet. By parachute."

"Tibet!" said Solo. "By parachute?"

"Why, Tibet's practically the end of the world!" Illya exclaimed.

"It may well be just that for all of us, if you fail," Mr. Waverly said soberly.

Act II: World's End This Way, Two Miles

Dawn arrived with chill magnificence.

In the east the snowy crests of the Himalayan peaks slowly glowed golden. The light rose behind the peaks and spilled down the western slopes, but it did little to relieve the stark, basalt severity of the landscape. Napoleon Solo groaned and thrashed in his bedroll.

His bones ached with cold. The rarified air stung his lungs. But he was getting used to it.
Five hours had passed since he and Illya jumped from the hatchway of the disguised cargo plane into abysmal blackness and the howling slipstream…

At the top of his lungs, Solo had raised the same question he had been raising ever since he discovered, back at the secret U.N.C.L.E. airstrip outside Macao, that it was to be a night drop:

"I hope you people know what you're doing." The wind tore his words away as he hung in the cargo plane door, fat in his para-suit which contained appropriate disguises and weapons. "I don't see anything down there but a big black nothing."

"We would regret landing atop Mount Everest by accident," Illya shouted.

The U.N.C.L.E. jump-master was a swarthy, jolly Portuguese from Macao. He showed his gold teeth. "Be assured, gentlemen, this aircraft has been equipped with the finest of computerized sensors. You will be dropping on to an open plateau between major peaks. The plateau is at least three miles across. Perfectly safe. You will land but a few miles from your target areas. Everything is in order."

"And U.N.C.L.E. always sends flowers if it isn't. Very comforting," Solo said, and jumped.

The ache in Solo's right ankle had not lessened very much. He stuck his right arm down into his bedroll and rubbed. They hadn't landed on one of the peaks, true enough. But Solo had conked against the side of a sizeable boulder, and twisted his right leg as he
slid down the boulder's side.

They had made their camp inside a ring of boulders, on a slope which was the beginning of a majestic peak. Illya was already working a short distance up the slope, burying his parachute and jumpsuit in the shale with a trenching tool. Solo enjoyed the comparative warmth of the bedroll a moment longer. Then, with a nothing-for-it groan, he tumbled out.

Soon he was working alongside Illya, burying his own gear.

The younger agent finished. He tossed the trenching tool into the shallow depression remaining and covered the tool by pushing more shale on top of it with his hands. When Illya stood up, Solo was grinning.

"'What's so comical, may I ask?" Illya's breath shot out in a cloud as he spoke.

"You. If you wore a get-up like that in New York, you'd get arrested."

Illya glanced down. He was clad in crude goatskin shoes, which were simply bags pulled up around his ankles and tied with cord, and an ankle-

length garment, much like a brown maternity costume, made of yards and yards of coarse wool. A rope cinched it in at his middle.

On his head he wore one of those curious ear-flapped pieces of headgear peculiar to Tibet. His face, hands, and in fact every inch of him, were dyed to a walnut color. The U.N.C.L.E. plastic surgeons had even managed to slant his eyes a bit, and wrinkle his skin so that it had a rough, wind-roughened texture.

"May I remind you, holy father," Illya replied, sarcastically, "that I am not the only one in the crowd in this outlandish get-up. I have played many strange parts in my time. But never one like this. If we can actually pass as Tibetan holy men, I'll be surprised. Probably the first Red Chinese soldier, peasant or THRUSH agent who sees us will call for our arrest while laughing himself into hysterics."

"Well, that's the way the prayer wheel revolves." Solo finished burying his gear. "Shall we dine and be off down the Yellow Brick Road?"

"I'm glad someone's cheerful," Illya said. They sat munching their field biscuits. These dry, flaky, utterly tasteless items were concealed, along with an assortment of weapons and other necessary gear, inside special pockets sewn into the voluminous material of their robes. Solo felt as if he was weighed down with lead. It didn't help his throbbing ankle.

Illya crunched the last of his biscuits. He stood up and brushed crumbs off his hands.
"I always thought Tibet was exotic. Chiming temple bells. Ronald Colman in brocade discovering the secret of eternal youth. Lowell Thomas riding into the sunset on a yak. This is a wasteland."

So it was. The plateau across which they now began to tramp showed no sign of human habitation. Vegetation was sparse and gray. They moved down from the slope and reached a faint symbol of civilization, a rutted road winding across the plateau. It came from behind them and stretched ahead, most of its course invisible because frequently twisted out of sight behind big rocks.

The sun climbed higher. The wind whistled incessantly in their ears. Even with the sunlight, they were cold.

"Are you sure we're going in the right direction?" Illya asked after twenty minutes.

Solo pulled a compass from his robe. The needle danced and steadied.

He nodded.

"The bearing checks. Besides, there isn't any other road. The instructions said go south. We're supposed to come to a crossroads, and meet our contact there. Let's keep walking and see if we can't get into the spirit of the part. Practice internal tranquility. Think uplifting thoughts."

"In the middle of several hundred thousand Red Chinese soldiers and sympathizer?" Illya asked. "Very funny."

Solo's teeth chattered. The landscape was savage, so empty and ringed around by those incredible peaks with cruel snow-spear tops, that he wanted to keep talking to keep their spirits up.

"It should be much further to -" Solo was saying, when he saw Illya freeze.

"Napoleon, listen!"

Illya whipped around, stared back up the road.

Scowling, Solo lifted one of the earflaps of his hat. He heard it. A motorized growl.

With the skirts of their lama robes flapping wildly, they dived toward the side of the road. The rumbling and growling grew. Illya tripped on the hem of his robe. He fell, letting out an explosive, "Damn!"

The gray-painted hood of a heavy truck appeared around a bend in the road.

Solo grabbed Illya's shoulder and dragged him bodily over the shale, into cover. And with hardly a moment to spare.

A second truck appeared behind the first. Then a third. The trucks were massive, gray, at least ten years old. They clunked and lumbered at a slow speed. Each had a big open bed to the rear of the cab. Solo peered cautiously from behind a rock as the lead truck drew abreast of their hiding place.

The driver of the truck had a flat, yellow face. He wore an olive uniform cap. The bed of the truck was jammed with Chinese soldiers. Rifles and pistols bristled. A tall officer stood spraddle-legged just behind the cab. He was scanning the landscape through field glasses which hung from a cord around his neck.

As the truck rumbled by, the officer let the field glasses fall.

Solo sucked in a breath. A slender white scar made an S-curve down the left side of the officer's face, from hairline to jaw. Altogether it was one of the cruelest faces Napoleon Solo had ever seen.

Barely even whispering, Solo said to Illya over his shoulder, "If we're lucky, they'll go on without –"

Suddenly a soldier in the first truck pointed and tugged the officer's sleeve. The officer raised his right hand. He barked a command in Chinese. The brakes of the truck squealed.

Solo's eyes grew grim. The truck had stopped not ten yards away, just a little way past their place of concealment. The officer was leaning over the side slats of the truck bed. He was staring at the shale where Illya had stumbled and fallen.

The officer's face animated with a sudden, cruel pleasure. He pointed to the all too visible marks in the loose earth. The soldier who had called attention to them nodded.

The officer began chattering more commands.

The soldiers in the truck unshipped the tailgate. Two soldiers jumped down, then two more. The officer scanned the boulders to the left and right of the hiding place of the U.N.C.L.E. agents.

"Well, it was a short trip," Solo said. He snaked out his pistol. So did Illya.

Cautiously the soldiers advanced to the place where Illya's fall had left traces in the shale. There they halted, rifles at the ready.

The officer still stood gripping the top slat the side of the truck. His expression was one of delight, anticipation. Then he appeared to grow annoyed at the timidity of his men. Shouting in Chinese, he waved them forward.

Straight toward Solo and Illya, the soldiers shuffled slowly.

Hot breath hit Solo in the back of the neck. Something wet and cold nuzzled him. He jerked his head around, as did Illya. The younger agent's eyes popped. He opened his mouth to let out an involuntary yell of surprise. Solo clapped his free hand over Illya's face and stifled the cry just in time.

Somewhere on the other side of the huge rock the boots of the soldiers crunched, coming closer.

And closer.

A huge, horned hairy yak, the Tibetan wild ox, had wandered out of the rocks behind the U.N.C.L.E agents and now stood with its forepaws planted beside Solo. The yak's large moist eyes regarded the interlopers with curiosity. The animal nuzzled Solo's face again with its damp, chilly snout.

"I think it liked you," Illya breathed.

At the back of his mind Solo was listening to the tramp of the boots of the soldiers. Surely they had reached the boulder by now. In another second they would round the rock and find their quarry.

What would happen when the shooting started? Could he get a shot past the yak's head? Doubtful. The damned thing kept sniffling and snuffling at him

as though he were a long-lost relative. Solo also expected that the first shots would startle or anger the yak. Probably it would pick him up on its sharp, glittering horns and that would be that.

On the other side of the rock, the soldiers were whispering to one another. The yak's huge, sandpapery tongue licked Solo's cheek affectionately. Solo glanced desperately at Illya, who reached up and slapped the yak lightly on its hairy flank.

The yak reared back and trumpeted. The soldiers beyond the rock let out startled cries. The yak kicked up its rear hoofs, snorted, put its horned head down and went charging out toward the road.

Solo and Illya peered out again. The yak was lumbering toward the truck, driving the Chinese soldiers before it. As the animal ran, it kicked and scattered the shale. Just this side of the truck the yak stopped. It swung its head from side to side as if assessing the odds. Then it uttered one more low-register complaint, and clattered off among the rocks.

The scar-faced officer looked unhappy. The mystery of the disturbed shale had been explained to his satisfaction - and regret. He jabbered irritably in Chinese, ordering the soldiers back into the truck. As soon as the tailgate was in position, the officer banged his fist four times on the cab roof. The truck rolled forward. The angry officer began to scan the landscape again with his field glasses.

The other two trucks followed. When the last vehicle had vanished, Solo stood up and dried his damp cheeks with his sleeve. He was, he discovered, shaking.

They waited ten minutes, inserted their hands in their sleeves, bowed their heads and began to trudge along the road once more.

Two

Fifteen minutes later they followed the road around a singularly large rock. The plateau beyond was relatively level. Just ahead, a second rutted road intersected the one no which they were walking. This other road ran at right angles to the first. On a slight slope near the crossroad stood a collection of small sod huts. Their roofs were thatched with long, dried yellow strands of coarse grass or weed.

Several long-haired goats wandered near one of the building, which had a large open doorway.

Near the buildings, a person in black pantaloons, fur-lined boots and coat and a conical basket-weaving hat was working a particularly unproductive-looking patch of ground with a primitive hoe.

Solo's right hand gripped his pistol, out of sight inside the left sleeve of his robe. He and Illya advanced cautiously. At the edge of the patch of ground they halted, faces impassive under the deep coatings of dye.

The person with the hoe stopped working and turned. Napoleon Solo did a mental double take. The person was a girl, with a wide, appealing mouth and charmingly Oriental dark eyes. In spite of the woolly fatness of the coat she wore, it was possible to see the distinct and charming outline of a well-shaped bosom beneath. Solo bowed ceremoniously.

"May the god shine his face upon you," he said, though not in the local tongue. Solo spoke Interlingua, the international scientific language.

"He has done so already," the girl replied, also in Interlingua. "And he has caused a double blessing to rain in white billows from the heavens –"

"- on to the place where the earth blooms despite a wintry blast," Solo completed the code.

"Father? Father!" The girl ran toward the hut nearest the crossroads. Abruptly she wheeled around. "Oh, I'm sorry. Please come in." She hurried inside, calling, "Father, they've come."

Solo and Illya entered the rude-walled home. A fire burned brightly on a crude hearth. An elderly Tibetan with a seamed yellow face rose from a table and bowed. Like the girl, he wore heavy dark pantaloons, a fur-lined coat and boots. Although his hair and small beard were pure white, his cheeks glowed with vigorous color and his eyes were alert.

"Welcome, welcome to both of you," he said. He extended his hand, American-style.

"I'm Napoleon Solo. This is Illya Kuryakin."

"I am Ah Lan," said the old farmer in fairly good English. "This my daughter Mei."

The beautiful Tibetan girl bowed.

Ah Lan indicated several crude benches.

"While we warm ourselves at my humble fire of yak dung chips," he said, "my daughter will provide us with some kumis, made of fermented mare's milk. You will find it most palatable."

Mei brought the men earthenware cups containing a hideous-looking liquid. Solo glanced at the stuff and his stomach turned over.

Solo took a sip and fought a wince. "Delicious, delicious." He drank no more.

But Illya tossed off the whole mugful in a series of gargantuan gulps, smacked his lips loudly and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. Ah Lan looked delighted. Mei began to direct her admiring glances Illya's way.

Ah Lan immediately called for a refill for Illya, who was valiantly repressing a belch. Mei poured more of the drink from a goatskin with a spout. Solo smirked in delight as Illya forced himself to drink heartily again.

"You came from the sky in parachutes," Ah Lan said. "Thus I was informed by the short wave radio which I keep concealed, in my humble stable to the

rear. Truly, the arm of the U.N.C.L.E. is long."

"So are the talons of THRUSH," Solo said

"How far is it to the valley?" asked Illya.

Ah Lan's face darkened. "The Valley of Ten Storms lies but seven or eight miles away. A day's trek under favorable circumstances. However, the way is very difficult."

"I suppose because THRUSH guards it well?" Solo said.

"No guards are needed," Mei put in. "During this time of the year, the only land route into the valley lies up the mountain at the far side of this plateau. There is a pass which is nearly impossible to negotiate because of the violent blizzards prevalent at this season. My honorable father and I have only reached the top of the pass once. We nearly froze to death before we were able to make our way down again."

"Pleasant prospect," Illya muttered, holding his dark-stained palms to the fire.

"How do the THRUSH people get in and out?" Solo wanted to know.

"I believe there is an airstrip within the green valley," Ah Lan replied.

"But you will guide us through the pass?"

"Though the way is hazardous," Ah Lan said, "I will." His expression grew thoughtful and sad. His eyes were turned toward the small, bright flames. "When members of the THRUSH organization came to this plateau, a year ago, they came disguised as Red Chinese soldiers. There was no airstrip in the valley then. It was a frozen waste. The THRUSH organization moved all of its construction and scientific equipment across this plateau by truck, on the very road which passes outside. They hauled the equipment over the pass in the spring season when the weather is most mild.

"At that time –" Ah Lan's voice dropped "- at that time I was blessed with two daughters. One day, while I toiled in the fields with Mei at my side, a

truck load of THRUSH construction engineers stopped at this humble cottage. My other daughter was alone. The THRUSH men were full of drink. They fell upon her and –"

Ah Lan shuddered. His eyes reflected the dancing fire with fire of their own.

He went on: "My daughter was dead when I returned with Mei. From that moment, I dedicated myself to the destruction of the evil forces which turned the Valley of Ten Storms from a wasteland of ice to a green and fertile hell. Yes, Mr. Solo, Mei and I will guide you through the blizzards into the valley. We are both familiar with the use of automatic weapons. Perhaps we can be of assistance."

"Well," Solo said, "I'm not exactly sure what our plan will be once we get into the valley. But our mission is to find and destroy some sort of laboratory THRUSH has set up for the purpose of controlling the weather."

Ah Lan nodded. "I assumed as much. Technology, not magic, has melted the ice within the valley and caused the rice fields to blossom with green shoots. Such a weapon should not be allowed to remain in the hands of devils such as these."

Illya stood up. "How soon can we get started?"

Ah Lan said, "In the morning –"

A rumble filled the room. Ah Lan paled. Mei ran to the door. She spun around, frightened.

"The trucks are coming back. They passed a while ago, traveling in the opposite direction and the soldiers searched here. The Chinese radar station in the mountains must have detected the plane from which you parachuted last night."

Once more she glanced outside. Solo and Illya were on their feet, guns drawn. The rumble increased.

Mei gripped the door frame tensely, watching.

After a long moment she relaxed.

"They are going on."

"It is only a temporary respite," said Ah Lan. "A terrible journey awaits us tomorrow."

Three

In single file, the four of them struggled upward through knee-deep snow.

They had departed from the crossroads at first light, encountering no more Chinese soldiers en route. The first few hours hadn't been difficult. The terrain was rocky, sloping upward, but footing was sure. Gradually, however, conditions grew worse as they climbed.

Light veils of cloud began to drift around them. The clouds obscured the pale sun. The last vegetation vanished when they reached the snow line. The snow began to deepen and the wind intensified. For the past hour the snow had been up to their knees. And there seemed to be little immediate prospect of relief. Up they went, up and higher.

On either hand rose immense and stark walls of rock, their tops lost in clouds of whirling, billowing snow. Solo realized that they must be in the pass proper. But how long it would take them to reach the crest, he didn't know. He stumbled ahead, kicking up great gouts of the white stuff.

The wind screamed.

The snow began to take on a grayish cast. Solo wondered if his eyes were going bad. He had a recurring vision. He saw a sumptuous, oversized bed in a tropical resort hotel. Angrily he shook his head to drive the vision out. If he fell prey to that sort of hallucination, he was in trouble. It would be all too easy to lie down in the snow and forget everything.

Blinking again, Solo halted this side of a deep drift. He peered around. No sane man would believe the time of day was noon.

The vista before him was one of unrelieved white-flecked gloom. The wind howled so loudly the effect on the ears was like sitting on top of an operating fire siren. Solo realized abruptly that he had lost sight of Mei's fur-clad figure ahead.

He could see nothing except snow and the sheer walls on either hand.

He lifted his fur-wrapped right arm and tore the rags from his mouth. The snow struck his bare face with little needles of pain. He shouted the name of his companions. Only the howling wind answered.

With much twisting and writhing, he managed to get his hand beneath the various layers of snow clothing which Ah Lan had provided. He located the butt of his pistol within the folds of his lama robe. He pulled the pistol out into the snowy air and fired it three times.

"That'll bring them." He stuffed the gun away and pulled on his mitten.

Soon, Napoleon Solo concluded that he had committed a grievous error in judgment. Instead of the shouts of his friends coming to his rescue, he heard a sinister rumbling overhead.

The rumbling grew louder. Solo looked up, shielded his eyes. His gut tightened. The echoes of the shots bouncing back and forth between the rock walls had dislodged a small avalanche. Even as Solo stared, practically hypnotized by the awful sight, several thousand tons of the stuff came hurtling downward toward him.

Solo threw himself backwards. An instant later a huge, wet mass slammed down onto him like a white sledgehammer. The world rocked and roared.

Solo clawed and sputtered. Snow surrounded him, buried him. He fought upward like a swimmer. The snow pressed against his face, weighed down on the back of his neck.

With a herculean lunge, he fought to its surface.

A few large chunks of snow crashed down like oversized projectiles. One whizzed past Solo by a margin of about two feet. The force of it dug a deep, deep hole in the drift holding him prisoner.

Suddenly a furry figure appeared, crashing and lurching toward him. Two others followed. More gigantic snowballs cascaded down. The rocky walls of the pass shook.

Illya, the old Tibetan and his daughter reached Solo, knelt, seized his arms. Illya shoved him to his feet. Ah Lan dragged Mei toward the far wall of the pass, crying:

"Seek shelter, quickly! The avalanche is coming!"

Like people demented, they ran, floundered, leaped, and crawled as best they could. They reached the pass wall and huddled against it as the air filled with thousands of great balls of snow. The balls suddenly solidified into a curtain of the stuff. Solo wrapped his arms around the trembling girl and pulled her head down against his chest.

Presently the white cascade stopped. The old, less alarming shriek of the blizzard returned. Ah Lan raised his seamed face and pointed. "The gods in their infinite
mercy chose to protect us."

The others looked up. A triangular ledge jutting from the rock above their heads was all that had saved them from being buried alive.

All of them were panting an floundering at an abysmally slow pace when Solo suddenly realized that the going had become easier.

He shouted, "I think the snow's sloping downward. Yes, look. The clouds have thinned up ahead. I see sunlight."

Ah Lan managed a smile. The worst is behind."

Their speed increased as the snow became less and less deep. Now it was possible to see the slate walls of the pass in sharper detail. The wind dropped off. Only a few snowflakes danced before their faces. And a breeze from a different quarter seemed to be shredding the misty gloom which had enveloped them for so many hours.

Solo and Mei tramped faster, Illya and the old Tibetan close behind. Shortly blazing sunlight struck their faces. The sky overhead spread frosty blue and cloudless. Illya tossed away the rags around his parka hood as Solo circled some tumbled boulders and
pulled up short, gasping.

"Now I believe it," he said as the others crowded wearily up behind him. "There really is a Shangri-La."

Four

The foothills of the peaks dropped gently away toward sparkling green rice fields. A bird sang somewhere. Trees bent in a gentle wind. Wind-ruffled water gleamed. Directly below them was some sort of orchard, the fruit-laden trees standing in neat rows. It was an altogether idyllic and beautiful scene, marred only by several structures far out in the center of the valley.

These were low, black-painted buildings of stone. Several had no windows. Others had a few, and resembled barracks. Behind this complex an airstrip bisected the lush landscape like a raw concrete wound.

"They don't take siestas in Tibet," Illya said. "Where is everyone?"

"I believe many of the laboratories and facilities are underground, Mr. Solo," Mei said. She had thrown back her parka. Her dark hair shone like a sleek bird's wing.

The look she gave Solo was warm and worshipful. Illya made a resigned face.

Grumpily Illya climbed out of his two sets of coats and trousers. He stowed them behind a rock and adjusted his priest's robe and headgear. In a moment the transformation of the whole group was complete. They were now two priests with darkly-hued faces and slanted eyes, plus an elderly farmer and his daughter.

They crouched behind rocks while Solo surveyed the valley with field glasses which he had taken from his robe. "That big building close to the far end of the airstrip looks like a hangar. But I still don't see a single human being anyplace."

"It will be too dangerous to attempt to approach during daylight," Ah Lan said.

Solo nodded. "But there's enough cover for us to go as far as that orchard. From there we can watch till nightfall."

Ah Lan peered toward the barracks-like structures. "Surely our entrance to the valley cannot have gone unobserved. Yet it appears that it did. As my daughter told you, much of the facility is believed to be built under the earth. Perhaps THRUSH feels itself so secure that guards are unnecessary.

"We'll find out after dark we try to get in the place," Solo said. He sat down against one the tree trunks. "Right now we might as well rest. The fun and games in the snow made me tired. Illya, how about breaking out some more of those crumbly crackers? You'd think U.N.C.L.E. could afford better fare for -"

A chill went all the way through Napoleon Solo as a sliding panel opened in the trunk of the tree directly across from him.

Other panels snapped open in the other tree trunks around them. Rifle muzzles appeared in the openings. Mei jumped into her father's arms with a cry of horror. Illya's jaw hung down in untypical amazement. Solo whipped his gun hand toward a fold of his robe.

"That would be inadvisable," said a voice from the largest tree in the lane.

The whole side of the trunk opened outward like a door. Through the door walked a tall man in the peaked cap and smart, tight-fitting black uniform of the officer elite of THRUSH.

The man had a large automatic in his right hand. A slender white scar traced an S-curve down the left side of his cruel face, hairline to jaw. It was the Red Chinese officer from the truck.

"You folks certainly switch sides fast around here," Solo said.

"Not at all, Mr. Solo," said the officer in English. "My loyalty has but one fixed point – THRUSH. Of course I know who you are. The cameras hidden in several imitation
pomegranates hanging on these trees have already supplied your photographs to our technologists just there."

The officer used his gun to indicate the black buildings in the center of the valley. "Our computers have analyzed the photos and sent back your names. Mr. Napoleon
Solo and Mr. Illya Kuryakin of U.N.C.L.E. These two traitors -"

The officer's cruel expression turned lascivious as he studied Mei. She huddled against Ah Lan. The old man's chin came up, defiant. The officer smiled.

"- we are familiar with them, too. They shall be dealt with."

"Since when does a Chinese nightingale turn into a THRUSH?" Illya asked.

The officer shrugged. "Actually, it's a most convenient arrangement. I have access to information from all the Chinese radar installations in the district. You see, we have been expecting visitors from U.N.C.L.E. ever since our experimental flight on Air Pan-Asia apparently met with failure due to your meddling.

"You were observed in Hong Kong taking Mr. Chee aboard the flight for the United States. So we have been preparing. As senior officer in charge of the district beyond the pass, I receive immediate reports of all unidentified

aircraft in our airspace. Thus I was reasonably certain you had arrived by parachute two nights ago.

"Of course I was forced to carry out the charade of searching the terrain with the truck convoy. A pretty predicament! I knew you were hiding behind those rocks beside the road. I saw the marks in the earth. But one of my soldiers also saw them, so I was unable to overlook them. Fortunately the wild yak happened along to explain away the marks and give me a legitimate excuse to call a halt to the search."

The scarred officer stepped two paces forward, to allow room for the other THRUSH soldiers who were appearing from the door in the tree. There were six of them, a squad, all in black boots, trousers, blouses. They carried rapid-fire machine pistols with large, round infra-red snooper sights mounted on top.

They were a mixed lot, typical of THRUSH forces: two appeared to be European, one English or American, and three Oriental. All of them had the flat, featureless expression of the professional assassin.

"Are there any more questions before it is my turn to be inquisitive?" the officer said.

"Yes," Solo said. "You didn't take us prisoner yesterday because you wanted to save us for THRUSH. Isn't that a pretty risky business?"

The officer looked amused. "In certain quarters it might be. Here it is not. This region of Tibet is sparsely populated. It is even more sparsely garrisoned by the Chinese army. Since I am in command of the area, my orders are executed without question."

Illya gestured at the valley, the peaceful, sun-dappled rice fields. "How do you convince your Chinese friends to leave this place alone? After all, observation planes from the Chinese air force must have spotted it."

"Naturally," the officer said. His tone indicated the question was naive. "Again, by deft maneuvering, all Chinese military units within a certain

radius have been convinced that this valley is actually a highly secret research installation - which is true - operated by the
Peking regime - which is not true. We manage to maintain the fiction."

Solo shook his head. "From Mao to THRUSH. That's quite a transformation."

The officer's lips curled. "We find the Chinese contemptible milksops."

The officer jerked his gun muzzle down the hill. "I believe we have wasted enough time. Shall we go?"

"Preferably to hell," Solo said, diving his hand under his robe for his pistol.

The odds were hopeless. As Solo dropped into a fighting crouch and leveled his gun, the THRUSH squad swarmed forward. Machine pistol butts thudded against his skull, into his midriff, onto the back of his neck. Solo swung a punch and hit nothing but air. A THRUSH soldier kicked him in the belly.
Solo went down on his knees. A rabbit-chop drove him flat. Other soldiers rushed out of the tree door to seize Illya, Ah Lan and Mei.

A little line of blood ran out of the left side of Solo's mouth as he sprawled on his back in the warm, fragrant orchard. The officer loomed above him, S-scar shining white. The officer placed the hobnailed sole of his boot on Solo's Adam's apple and pressed down.

"That was a damned fool trick," said the officer. He smiled thinly. "I can see by the expression on your face, Mr. Solo, that you are surprised I speak your language."

"Yes," Solo grunted.

"It's quite simple. I was educated. in your country. At U.C.L.A."

Solo said, "I should have guessed."

For his sarcasm he got another forty pounds of pressure applied to his throat, hard.

Act III: So Sorry, Mark Twain

The four prisoners were taken to one of the black buildings. An elevator shaft carried them an unknown distance underground. They were led down a corridor to a huge chamber equipped with computers, control consoles, and a dozen television monitors with fifty-inch screens.

Generators hummed. Technicians in THRUSH smocks busied everywhere. As their captors prodded them forward, Solo noticed that several of the monitors which cast a pale, eerie light over the vaulted rooms showed scenes in the valley. But three of the screens contained views of buildings and a harbor which Solo could identify.

"They're interested in Hong Kong for some reason," he whispered to Illya.

"No talking!"

The officer with the S-scar hit Solo in the lower backbone with a swagger stick. Solo ground his teeth together. That particular nasty was going to be dealt with before this affair was finished.

His attention was diverted to their destination, a large, open area in the center of the humming chamber. The focal point of the area was a spacious work table. Two objects sat on it. One was a dully shining vinyl-covered belt, of the sort the renegade pilot had worn. The other was the belt's companion equipment, a black generator box.

A disconcerting difference hit Solo then. This black box was three times the size of the one discovered in Alfred C. Chee's luggage.

Hovering over the apparatus were two men. One was bony, horse-jawed, with thin gray hair over an elongated skull. He had Occidental skin coloring but slanted eyes. His hands fluttered restlessly at his waist. He peered through thick spectacles as the officer marched the prisoners up to the table.

"Ah, Major Otako! Well done, well done," said the man with spectacles.

"Thank you, Dr. Dargon. We had no difficulty. I trust, sir, that you and the general will turn them over to me as soon as you are finished with them. I would consider it an honor to be allowed to dispose of two lickspittle servants of U.N.C.L.E. and their treacherous guides. I assure you the liquidation will be conducted in proper style."

"Yes, yes; you're expert at such things," said Dr. Dargon. He giggled.

His companion walked, or rather appeared to ooze, forward. He was Chinese, with a bald, shining pate. He weighed close to four hundred pounds. The white planter's suit which he wore resembled a tent. His four yellow chins all but hid his necktie.

The jolly fat man's look was deceptive. Solo knew it the moment his gaze met the Oriental's blubber- socketed eyes boring into his.

"It will not be long before your services are required, Major," the huge man said. He spoke in an asthmatic wheeze, resting the palms of his hands on his immense paunch. "You are Solo and you are Kuryakin, eh? Well, I have heard of you both. Perhaps you have heard of me also. General Weng, at your service. Forgive me for appearing in mufti.

"I am about to depart from Hong Kong to conduct a major test of this apparatus you see before you. I will be taking off from the airstrip within the hour. But I did not want you to arrive without being properly greeted."

General Weng moved round the table. His right hand closed over Solo's forearm. Through the wool of the holy robe, the fingers cut viciously into Solo's flesh. He had to fight to keep his face from cracking with pain. General Weng increased the pressure.

"After all, Mr. Solo, it was you and your associate who disrupted our first full-scale test of the storm machine."

"Well, I'm sorry about that," Solo said. The pain from the pressure of the fat fingers brought dizziness. With a gasp Solo added, "It's just that I've always

had this silly thing about thunder and lightning -"

Illya recognized Solo's plight. He raised a diversion: "How does it happen, General Weng, that an officer so highly placed in the Red Chinese regime becomes a tool of THRUSH?"

The general released Solo, who rocked back on the balls of his feet, pale. The general held his paunch once more.

"Long ago, Kuryakin, I realized that the so-called plans of the Chinese leaders for world conquest were ill conceived. Mao is an addlepated poet surrounded by weaklings and sycophants. They will destroy themselves. They are not to be taken seriously. THRUSH, on the other hand, will achieve its goal of total domination."

"If you don't think the Chinese are serious," Solo said, "I'd hate to hear what you're cooking up."

Dr. Dargon sucked noisily on one of his pointed front teeth. "By all means tell him, General."

The general laid his hand on top of the generator box. He stroked it with an almost sensual pleasure. "I am sure the significance of our current plan will be lost on these two peasants who have been duped into aiding you, Mr. Solo. But perhaps you and Kuryakin can appreciate it. Two important nations in the Asian bloc have recently found their relations menaced by rising tensions. A number of border incidents have resulted. Skirmish fire between their troops. A few deaths on each side. The tensions have increased to the point where war threatens. Such a war could plunge Asia, and the entire globe, by escalation, into a holocaust."

Illya's expression was unpleasant. "Horror makes you THRUSH people so cheerful."

General Weng chuckled and held his paunch. "Naturally. THRUSH is holding the high
cards."

Solo noticed that Mei had regained her composure. With her father's arm around her waist, she digested Weng's remarks. Solo was in the dark about everything except the need to escape. He got busy checking the layout of the large chamber.

A railed concrete ramp led upward from the floor along the one wall. Two THRUSH guards with full battle dress manned this exit, over which a red bulb flashed intermittently. The prisoners had been brought down a similar ramp on the room's opposite side. As far as Solo could tell, the command center had no other exits.

Weng peeled back his white suit cuff. He consulted a highly capitalistic platinum wristwatch. "Time is short. You will understand," he said, "that I cannot participate in the amenities this occasion demands, much as I would wish." Weng's small eyes shone with amusement. "Major Otako is competent to handle them, however."

"And I will assist," Dr. Dargon added with a somewhat maniacal cackle. "My work is complete. Oh, yes, finished. My precious -" A pat of the black generator box "- is now in the hands of my co-officer in THRUSH. We have a delightfully effective test planned for this unit. The unit, incidentally, is of triple capacity, considering the one aboard the jet plane as our basis for rating. How fortunate, don't you agree, that we have an opportunity to conduct a large-scale experiment and reap practical rewards at the same time?"

"What are you talking about?" Solo asked.

General Weng feigned bewilderment. "Why, Mr. Solo, don't you know? As students of - not to say meddlers in - world affairs, are you not aware that the two nations I alluded to a moment ago are even now convening secretly in Hong Kong to try to settle their differences around the conference table before Asia is plunged into war? The conferees arrived yesterday in the Crown Colony via ordinary commercial aircraft. They will be meeting in the Hotel Hong Kong International, ostensibly as delegates to the Seminar on Asian Cultural Resources. That is merely a blind, to allow them to hold the conference on neutral territory. We have ways of knowing these things."

General Weng turned to study one of the huge television monitors on the wall. Its camera sent back a sharp picture of the black building above ground, which the U.N.C.L.E. agents had guessed to be a hangar. The hangar door was shut tight. But the screen showed a uniformed figure operating some sort of switch box alongside the great door.

A technician from the monitor board strode up and saluted. "General, your aircraft will be on the ready line in five minutes."

Weng nodded. He snapped his fingers. Two THRUSH men rushed to the table. One was wheeling a steamer trunk equipped with casters. The other carried a bulging suitcase.

The technicians loaded the generator into the trunk. Then they packed the switch belt in among the several folded suits of tent-like size. These disappeared as the technician shut and latched the grip. Weng beamed at his luggage, which was colorfully decorated with travel decals.

"Just a happy-go-lucky tourist on a holiday." Weng wheezed with delight and massaged his paunch. "I shall set up our perfected storm generator and produce the most violent weather Hong Kong has ever experienced. Total devastation. The hotel and those at the conference will be destroyed. Then I shall remove certain secret, key parts from the equipment and let the shells be found. They will bear unmistakable markings. When found, the equipment will be immediately identified as the property of the secret service of one of the nations attending the conference. Immediately –" Weng gestured flamboyantly "- total war."

"And THRUSH will be left to pick up the pieces?" Solo grated.

"Yes, isn't that splendid?" Dr. Dargon made unpleasant juicy noises as he sucked his front tooth. His eyes moved like darting fish behind his lenses. "The test will place THRUSH in the position of being able to successfully submit its demands to every government on the globe. Those demands will call for total surrender. And when nations face devastation by hurricanes, floods, blizzards, parching droughts - surrender will be both total and prompt."

The technician said, "General? The aircraft -"

"Yes, I'll be on my way. Good day to all of you. Dr. Dargon, Major Otako, I leave our guests to your tender ministrations."

And, with a potentate's magnificence, General Weng lifted his chin and marched toward the ramp.

Solo sidled near Illya. He hoped to whisper a code word. He had to alert Illya to what he was planning. A desperate course, naturally.

General Weng had already reached the base of the ramp. THRUSH functionaries followed him, one carrying the decal-decorated suitcase, the other pushing the trunk. Each wore a holstered pistol.

The light above the ramp doors changed from red to amber. Then it showed green and stopped blinking. Solo inched closer to Illya.

Major Otako whacked Illya viciously on the right wrist with his swagger stick. "Keep a suitable distance between you!"

Solo would never have a chance to communicate with Illya now. From the corner of an eye he observed the TV monitor scanning the hangar. The screen showed a sleek, unmarked four-engine THRUSH turbo-jet taxiing forward. Solo took the action the moment required.

He spun on the ball of his foot, catching a last glimpse of the monitor camera as it panned to follow the turbo-jet out to the loading ramp.

"Stand still!" Major Otako shouted as Solo moved.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent spun, yanked the swagger stick from the hand of the astonished officer, and bashed him over the nose. Blood spurted. Otako howled and reeled backwards. Solo shoved his hand into the voluminous folds of his holy robe.

The THRUSH searchers had not been quite thorough enough. A couple of items had gone undetected. Solo pulled out one of those now, thumbing the clip on the combination ball point pen and anti-personnel weapon.

A deadly lime-colored cloud of 14-4 tranquilizer gas sprayed over the THRUSH soldiers and technicians who were charging him from the left.

"Down, Illya!" Solo shouted. The younger agent flattened, dragging Ah Lan and Mei with him. Solo kept spinning like a top. The swath of greenish gas trailed around him in a circle.

One THRUSH minion leveled his machine pistol at Solo's neck. He caught a whiff of the gas. He grinned foolishly and fainted away.

Alarm sirens warbled. Scarlet lights danced on the console boards. The huge iron doors to the ramp where the prisoners had entered clanged open. Fresh THRUSH reinforcements charged in, bumbling against one another in their eagerness to be the first to shoot. But the greenish gas had made vision difficult. Solo seized Illya's shoulder.

"We've got to stop that plane! Follow me!"

Quickly Illya helped Mei and a struggling Ah Lan to their feet. He threw his woolly-robed arm across his mouth and nose by way of demonstration. "Cover your faces when we go out through the ring of gas. Now run!" And he followed Solo, who was already charging toward the ramp.

The guards at the head of the ramp sighted their rifles at him. Solo wrestled with the folds of his robe. He had to hold his skirts up with one hand and hunt for what he wanted with the other.

He found it. The rifles of the guards crashed. A bullet whizzed past his head, tugging at the earflap of his hat. Solo flung the globular pellet he had taken from a concealed pocket in his robe.

The pellet went *pong* on the iron doors. Then the ramp heated up to an unbearable temperature. Solo ran straight ahead into the billowing, steamy clouds. Sweat popped out on his face. His cheeks felt parboiled. But in seconds the effect diminished.

Solo pulled up short in front of the doors. They had melted in their frames and now resembled puddles of metal margarine. Both THRUSH guards were dead, boiled alive by the thermal device. One had stood a bit too close. The white bone of his skull leered.

Beyond the doors the corridor ran on to an elevator. General Weng was struggling with his wheeled steamer trunk and his valise. Finally he crammed them inside. A moment later the doors snapped shut.

Nearer to Solo, the two THRUSH functionaries who had been assisting Weng had turned back. They each went to one knee, sighting their pistols. Solo tossed his second and last thermal pill. Heat and steam vapor and shrieks of agony filled the corridor.

About to jump over the superheated metal of the melted doors, Solo jerked up short. He whirled.

"Illya?" The shout of alarm was out before he saw what had happened.

On this side of the chamber, the only threats had been the door guards. On the other side, the THRUSH reinforcements were advancing warily toward the greenish fumes which hung like a mammoth smoke ring in the air. Charging through that smoke, Ah Lan had evidently been overcome despite the precaution of holding his arm across his face. He had fallen. In the thick of the smoke Illya and Mei were bending over the prostrate old man.

They were inhaling too much of the gas. Illya staggered. He wigwagged his arm vaguely in Solo's direction.

"Go - on, Napoleon. Can't make it. The old man is -" Illya corkscrewed to the floor, his humanitarian efforts having undone him. Mei collapsed on top of him. The THRUSH soldiers across the room let out a bay of triumph.

Solo remained at the top of the ramp for one tortured moment. In that moment his emotions rebelled against his training. Of necessity, training won. With a choked curse he turned his back on the control chamber and ran.

He tried to wipe the sight of Illya's stricken face from his mind as he pounded up the corridor to the elevator. The sirens wailed insanely.

How much time had passed? Was the plane already taking off? Solo hit the elevator's call switch, waited, prayed.

The THRUSH officers yelled as they charged through the tranquilizing gas, uniform sleeves covering their mouths and eyes. Solo wanted to go back to the chamber, fight and die in the attempt to rescue Illya. Yet he knew that he had no choice but to go the other way. Should General Weng reach Hong Kong with the storm generator, war would be unleashed. Solo had a higher allegiance than that which he owed to Illya. The name of it was U.N.C.L.E.

Machine pistols began to stutter. Solo ducked, dived, dodged. The elevator doors opened. He leaped inside. Bullets stitched a pattern up and down the rear wall of the cage as the doors banged shut.

Panting, Solo leaned against the side of the elevator. His heart thudded hard in his chest. The elevator rose steadily, humming. Solo worried that THRUSH would cut off the power and trap him inside. But evidently his break had thrown the base into confusion. Sirens still wailed tinnily through speakers in the elevator's ceiling. But the sensation of upward movement did not stop.

Solo tried to organize his thoughts. He had no weapons left. He had to find one, so that he would be armed when he got aboard the plane - if he got aboard.

The elevator stopped. The doors rolled back and sinister sundown light flooded in. Dead ahead Solo saw the turbo-jet on the concrete ready line.

A controller stood on the tarmac near the black-painted nose, wigwagging with lighted batons. The main door of the fuselage was open. The elephantine General Weng was struggling up a baggage ramp with his suitcase and steamer trunk. The turbo-jet's engines screamed at full rev. Weng's suit flapped like laundry in the prop wash.

All this registered on Solo in an instant. So did the two THRUSH soldiers turning to charge him, bayonets fixed.

Solo sidestepped at the last second. He kicked the soldier nearest him in the backside. The man hit his head on the black concrete wall of the building. Solo seized the man's rifle, spun around and thought of Illya and rammed the bayonet to its hilt in the stomach of the THRUSH soldier still on his feet.

The man wasn't on his feet for long. Solo wrenched the bayonet free. He knocked it off its mount and left it behind, checking the rifle mechanism as he ran toward the aircraft.

The controller with the lighted batons threw them aside. He jerked out a pistol. He began firing as Solo's weird, flapping figure came charging out of the weird reddish gloom.

Up the baggage ramp Solo went, two steps at a time. Just before he jumped inside he heard the controller shout something to the plane's pilot.

The fuselage door closed and locked automatically. Solo blinked in the gloom of the lavishly appointed cabin. The cockpit door remained closed. There was an odd aroma in the air, coming through tiny ceiling ventilators as the plane began to roll.

On the carpeted floor General Weng lay spread-eagled, unconscious. Solo took a step toward the obese man. The smell from the ceiling ventilators increased. Solo recognized it.

He raised the rifle to try one shot at the steamer trunk. His hands were putty. He could not hold the rifle.

He cursed the THRUSH pilot who had decided on his own authority to incapacitate General Weng in order to incapacitate Solo also. He cursed the THRUSH technologists who had dreamed up the idea of pumping ether through the air system into the plane's cabin. He cursed most of all his own miserable failure, as everything around him took on the blurred motion of a camera in the flash pan.

Slowly Solo spiraled to the floor. With a scream of turbo-jets, the THRUSH aircraft lifted in the red sunset toward the high Himalayan peaks.

Two

You are a very brave girl," said Illya Kuryakin to the pale-cheeked Mei.

"The worst shock has passed," she replied. "My honorable father was advanced in years. His ancestors will make him welcome. And the blow which the THRUSH soldier gave him with the butt of his rifle –"

Mei's lovely face wrenched. "The blow was quick. I pray he felt little pain."

Illya's wrists were already tingling. "How about you? Does it hurt?"

"Not too much."

"Good. Because I am afraid it will get worse."

"You are a very brave person yourself, Mr. Kuryakin."

Manacles had been placed around his wrists. These had been hooked to a chain which hung from the center of the ceiling of a large room. The room was shaped like the interior of a chicken's egg, point downward. Its walls were gray. The lighting was medicinally bright, but diffuse.

A winch had raised Illya so that his feet were a good yard above its floor.

Mei was similarly chained, dangling by her wrists beside him. The THRUSH guards had completed hanging up their prisoners some ten minutes earlier. They had vanished through an oval door in the wall. Illya noticed that the door had thick gasketing all around it. A very tight seal on the chamber boded no good.

A faint electronic hum filled the chamber. Illya twisted his head too suddenly. The effort put additional strain on his arms. The manacles cut into

his wrists and he swayed uncontrollably. He reminded himself not to indulge in that sort of violent maneuver again.

"Greetings, conspirators," said the voice of Dr. Dargon. It was a voice with a somewhat crazed cackle in it. Dr. Dargon was peering at them from behind a thick window in the curved wall. The electronic hum had been the sound of the motor which rolled back the panel covering the window.

Beside Dargon, in some sort of control booth, stood Major Otako. His S-scar shone like a white worm on his cheek. Illya made out two technicians huddled over consoles where small lights flickered in sequence.

"Major Otako suggested that we give you a first-hand taste of our storm apparatus," Dargon said.

"If it's all the same to you -" Illya began.

Filtered through amplifiers, Dargon's voice rasped: "Unfortunately it is not."

"Well, Napoleon Solo got away, and he'll cook your Cantonese hash for you, I promise!" Illya shouted. "What happens to us is of no importance."

"Why must you hurt us?" Mei said. The blood had drained from her face. "Why can't you simply kill us? What can you want from us at this point?"

Dr. Dargon sucked his tooth noisily. The sound carried over the amplifiers. His pig eyes loomed through the double thickness of his spectacles and the control booth glass.

"Why, my dear child, all we want from you is a simple thing." Dr. Dargon pressed his nose against the glass. "We want to hear you say - as the Americans have it - uncle!"

This convulsed Major Otako. Dr. Dargon's face beaded with perspiration. The THRUSH scientist obviously enjoyed torturing people. To one of the technicians he exclaimed:

"Shall we demonstrate our weather control chamber? Perhaps some winds to begin with?"

A ring of concealed panels up near the ceiling sprang open. Gusts of air whipped into the chamber. Illya began to twist and sway as the winds gripped him.

The chain linking his wrists to the ceiling creaked and revolved. Illya was twisted one way until the chain could twist no more. Then the chain unwound. Illya spun back the opposite way. To this wild motion was added the back and forth thrust of huge air currents which alternately caught him from two directions.

Over the keening sound of the mechanized wind came Mei's whimper of pain. Then Dargon's voice again:

"In this chamber, Mr. Kuryakin, we first achieved our breakthrough. We created artificial weather conditions. Of course this room is primitive. This antiquated installation is ideal for our present purpose, however." Dargon clapped his hands. "Major, our guests are not suitably impressed. Shall we generate a bigger storm?"

Major Otako smiled viciously. "Oh, Dargon, let's not be pikers. Typhoon velocity winds."

"Typhoon velocity it is!"

The incredible burst of wind which poured into the chamber made Illya swing wildly at the end of the chain. Each swing brought fresh shocks of pain to his shoulders, his arms, and soon his whole body. The winds veered direction without warning. This increased the sudden, savage pull. Mei began to cry again. Her tears were whipped away by the wind's force.

Illya's mind boggled at the infernal cacophony beating on his ears. Somehow, though, Dr. Dargon's amplified cackle penetrated it:

"For dessert, let us try a sampling of Sahara heat."

To the wind was suddenly added boiling temperature. Perspiration rivered down Illya's face. He wanted to shout aloud in pain. He would not give Dragon and Otako the satisfaction.

He shut his eyes.

The heat was rising well into the one hundred and twenties. Illya felt as though he were being slammed back and forth by a killer sirocco. His arms vibrated with agony. Even his toes had begun to ache. Sweat plastered him. He felt himself growing faint –

With an abrupt jerk his body stilled at the end of the chain. The wind died. The heat diminished. Dimly he heard Dargon say, "The weak little fool has passed out."

Painfully Illya turned his head. He was glad to see Mei's head slumped on her breast. Unconsciousness was the best narcotic for this sort of punishment.

Dr. Dargon conferred with Major Otako. He seemed to agree with the major's whispered suggestion. A door inside the control booth opened, flooding it momentarily with light.

The technicians and a chuckling Otako departed.

Dr. Dargon removed a ring of keys from the pocket of his smock. He jingled them derisively at Illya hanging there and panting.

"Only a temporary rest, only temporary. We'll lock up until the girl recovers. We have a great many thrilling experiences in store for you. These were simply samples. I can see you didn't care for them. Well, it's a pity, because we'll be back. Of course you won't know how soon. Ten minutes? Two hours?" Dr. Dargon jangled the keys. "You can agonize over how soon we'll begin again. That, too, is part of the sport. Pleasant worries, Mr. Kuryakin!"

The amplifier coughed and went out. Dargon left the control booth. "Napoleon," Illya said to the emptiness, "I hope you're grateful."

There was a faint clink of the chain as Illya accidentally moved and set himself swinging again. His arms felt hot and swollen. For the first time, he groaned in agony.

Time became unreal. Fear became the true reality. Illya tried not to dwell on the very thought which Dargon had planted. It was impossible.

The solitude and pain created dread. The dread induced a kind of reverse anticipation. Illya found himself hanging stone-still and staring at the heavily gasketed door, wondering, how soon will it open? How soon will the booth be occupied again? How soon? How soon?

Three

His head jerked up. He glanced around the egg-shaped room. The lights had been lowered. The chamber had a twilight dimness. It felt like the middle of the night.

Illya's arms were totally numb. He had feeling from his waist down, but precious little. He realized that he must have passed out for a time. Cautiously he turned his head. The small movement started him swinging. His arms throbbed and ached.

Mei's eyes were open. She stared at him dully, too tortured to speak.

"I think it's night," Illya croaked. "I think they're leaving us alone."

"Until the morning," the girl breathed through puffy lips.

"Napoleon will reach Hong Kong. He'll do something to help us."

"No one can help us. At least I shall die with - a brave friend."

The oval door clanged back. Dr. Dargon stepped over the sill. He carried a pistol in one hand and what appeared to be a black and white glossy photograph in the other.

Dargon approached and peered up at them. "Ah, you're awake. It is late, and other matters prevented us from returning our attentions to you this evening. However, I felt you must receive this vital news. It is my pleasure to inform you that your friend Solo has run out of rope. He is dead."

Illya's heart missed one pumping beat. "You're lying."

Dargon shrugged. "Well, for all practical purposes he is dead. Very likely General Weng has already attended to it. Solo's assault on the plane failed. Here, see for yourself. This picture was just transmitted from the electrophoto unit in the aircraft."

Horrified, Illya recognized the subject of the photo. Napoleon Solo lay unconscious on a carpet. A rifle had fallen at his side. Background details suggested the interior of an airplane. Illya squinted to see the photo better. It was untouched. Solo's face looked chalky, lifeless.

Dargon said: "I felt these tidings would help guarantee cheerful thoughts until we return to visit with you again. I am sure - *aargh*!"

The sudden slam of Illya's feet against the sides of Dargon's neck made the doctor squeal. In one burst of ebbing strength, Illya had swung forward and smacked his heels together. His feet held the scrawny flesh above Dargon's collar in a tight grip. Adrenalin pumping into Illya's body gave him the tiny extra measure of strength he needed.

Dargon struggled feebly and dropped his gun. It clattered away.

"The keys," Illya panted. "Throw the keys up toward my hands or I'll break your neck."

Dargon peered into Illya's face. What he saw there, coupled with his own innate cowardice, convinced him that temporary cooperation was the wisest course. He gulped in genuine terror.

Illya used every bit of his considerable strength to maintain the pressure on Dargon's neck. He said through tightly-locked teeth, "If you make a single

move in the direction of that gun, I will cut off your circulation and kill you with the pressure of my foot. U.N.C.L.E trains its people in neurophysiology. My right heel is resting in a potentially fatal spot. You may be able to jerk away, but you will be dead by the time you reach your gun. Now throw the keys at my hands, and very carefully. You have only one chance.
I hope your aim is accurate."

Dargon's eyes grew saucer-like. "It's a - a cheap, filthy bluff."

"Then you have nothing to lose by submitting your conviction to the scientific method. Shall we run a little test, Doctor?"

He did no know how much longer he could maintain his pressure. But Dargon gave in. He clawed the keys from his smock. He licked his lips and threw them high.

Illya released Dargon's neck. The doctor had aimed to miss, as Illya knew he would. Illya
wrenched his body forward in a tremendous tumbler's kick-out. That way he managed to bring his hands into a position to catch the keys as Dargon dove for the gun on the floor.

Illya had to work by feel, twisting one key after another into the lock mechanism which he had previously located in the six-inch bar between the manacles. Dargon got hold of the gun. He whirled. Illya found the right key. The manacles snapped open. He dropped and hit the floor as Dargon's shot thundered.

Like a cat Illya raced for the scientist as Dargon tried to level the gun for another shot. His hand trembled like a wind-lashed bough.

"Help, help!" Dargon piped in ludicrously reedy tone. Then Illya chopped him brutally in the throat. Dargon collapsed.

"The shot!" Mei exclaimed. "The guards will come -"

"Possibly not," Illya breathed. "Unless I am wrong, a test chamber like this is amply insulated. Wait here."

He snatched the keys and ran out through the oval door. In moments, he had entered the control booth from an empty corridor. He located and activated the winch. Mei was soon on the floor, covered with several yards of chain. More was coming down on top of her every second as Illya sprinted back in and unlocked her. His eyes were grim.

"We must assume Napoleon is dead, Mei. Therefore this foul lump -" He prodded the just-awakening Dargon with the pistol. "- is going to be our tour escort. He is going to show us how to get out of here, and guide us to Hong Kong."

On hands and knees the stupefied, terrified Dargon stared up into the muzzle of Illya's gun.

Illya dragged Dargon to his feet. "Show us the scenic exit route. And quickly!"

Four

Napoleon Solo wakened with a buzzing skull and a mouth which tasted like a mixture of camphor oil and woolen athletic socks.

Above him soared a pastel ceiling. He turned his head. A rich wine-colored sea of nylon carpeting stretched away to a pair of white doors with gold hardware. Dotted here and there like islands upon the carpet sea were assorted pieces of furniture in the style Solo characterized as Assembly Line Modern. White, and upholstered in plastic.

Cautiously Solo stood up. In a couple of minutes the Oriental gong players inside his temples suspended their music.

The floor tilted into place and held steady.

Solo was in a luxurious hotel room. Tall French doors stood open on a small marble terrace. Past the balustrade he glimpsed high peaks with bright buildings crowding their shoulders. He saw water - a harbor.

A ferryboat chugged toward the distant, misty mainland. Junks and sampans clogged the water in the nearer distance. From out of sight below the balcony, a city's sing-song cacophony rose.

"Welcome to Hong Kong, Mr. Solo," boomed a familiar voice.

Spinning round, Solo gaped. Beside an open door which he had not noticed stood a Eurasian girl with shoulder-length black hair. Her eyes were pansy-colored. She did not have the typical, slender build of the Oriental woman. She was a few inches taller than Solo himself.

The girl wore a white, shimmering blouse, voluptuously tight black riding trousers and highly polished black boots. Her figure was gorgeous. Her eyes and her pistol weren't.

"Is someone using you for a dummy?" Solo said. "I heard General Weng."

The general's polished head poked around the edge of the open doorway where the girl with the slanted eyes had taken up her stance. "My little charade," Weng said in his asthmatic wheeze. "I am here, in the flesh, so to speak." He appeared, hands pressed to paunch and a jaunty white woven tropical hat freshly jammed onto his skull. "Are you surprised to find yourself alive in my suite in Hong Kong?"

"That's a considerable understatement." Solo had been outfitted in slacks, a fresh white shirt, shoes, socks and other linen, all of his size. In his shirt's breast pocket he felt an oblong thing, like an old friend. He reached up to pull it out.

"Do not raise your hand," said the girl with a charming smile, "or I will shoot you."

"You don't have to enjoy your work so much. I only wanted a cigarette."

"It will be permissible for him to smoke," Weng nodded. "Our agents searched him thoroughly when the plane landed. He has no weapons. A brilliant idea my pilot had, eh, Solo? Doping us both in order to capture you? And captured you are. May I present Miss Rachel Fong of our Hong Kong apparatus? Miss Fong is only twenty-two, but she has held the regional THRUSH medal for superior marksmanship for the past three years. I trust that will be sufficient warning."

The girl's ripe smile widened. At first, her pansy-colored eyes had seemed to hold a smoky, romantic warmth. Now Solo decided with a shiver that he had confused sensuality for good clean sadism.

Carefully he reached into his shirt pocket. He drew out the cigarette case and flicked the top open. After he had lit up, he replaced the case.

He did not yet know how he would capitalize on the error of the THRUSH searchers who had overlooked his pocket communicator. Probably there had been no time for an electronic scan of his person. The communicator did hold several cigarettes.

Unfortunately, the unwavering presence of Miss Rachel Fong's mammoth snout-nosed pistol gave him no immediate opportunity to use the communicator. So he left it in his shirt as his ace. He needed one if he was to play this game out, not only for Mr. Waverly, but for the sake of Illya, and Ah Lan and Mei. He wondered how they had died.

General Weng gestured to the open French doors. "Lovely morning, isn't it?"

"I suppose you'll do your best to change it," Solo said.

Weng's paunch heaved once or twice by way of appreciation. "You really are most entertaining, Mr. Solo. As a matter of fact I am on my way to do just that. The storm generating apparatus is stowed in my limousine." Weng examined his platinum watch. "The car is at the curb now, I believe. This hotel should be relatively safe. A pity we can't say the same for the Hong Kong International. Good day, Mr. Solo. Enjoy your balcony seat

overlooking the display of Mother Nature at her most capricious. About an hour and we should be positioned for a bit of typhoon. Watch the sky."

General Weng waddled toward the door. Solo said, "Why can't you work from here?"

"We follow the recommendations of Dr. Dargon and our other scientists as to optimum location."

"Where is your optimum location, General?"

"Ah, Mr. Solo, even though I am positive that you can do THRUSH no harm while Miss
Fong attends you, it would be unwise, and a breach of policy, for me to reveal the information. Even Miss Fong does not know. As soon as my task is finished I shall return here and we shall fly back to Tibet together. There you will be most permanently decommissioned -"

Weng chuckled at his little euphemism "- as an agent of U.N.C.L.E. I have already decided to have motion pictures shot of the entire proceedings. They will be forwarded anonymously to your superiors, for whatever amusement they may provide."

With a jaunty wave General Weng marched out. Miss Fong latched the door behind him. Solo waited.

The Eurasian girl leaned against the gold-flecked panel and scraped her shoulder blades on the wood in a slow, feline way. Solo cocked a mental eyebrow. Maybe Miss Rachel Fong was not so loyal as General Weng imagined.

Solo unloosed his most potent smile. "Miss Fong, you're the sexiest THRUSH agent I've ever seen. And I've seen scads of them."

The smile on the lips of Miss Rachel Fong widened appreciably, as if in invitation.

With this encouragement Solo advanced a couple of steps. Miss Fong did not fire a bullet into his stomach. That was even more encouraging.

Solo was now barely; a step away from the girl's warm, moist mouth. Her pansy-colored eyes were lidded.

Miss Fong closed her eyes and pouted her lips. Solo murmured, "You are young. Miss Fong. And pretty. Indeed you are pretty pretty -" Solo timed his last word to come out just at the moment he was pressing his lips to Miss Fong's and preparing to rabbit punch her.

Miss Fong hit him in the stomach with her knee.

Two more karate chops and one judo toss later, Solo lay on his back. Miss Fong drew her leg back gracefully and kicked him in the side of the head.

"I didn't realize that in addition to being good with a gun you were the leading actress in the THRUSH theatre guild," Solo groaned.

"That was your error," Miss Fong replied with a smile that was no longer dewy, but venomously delighted. "You U.N.C.L.E. agents are such naive fools. You think a mere flex of a bicep will strip us of our dedication to the most glorious organization in the history of the world." As if to emphasize the incorrectness of Solo's reasoning, Miss Fong hauled off and let him have another kick in the temple.

This final act of defiance was her undoing. Solo grabbed her flying boot and gave it a terrific wrench.

With an enraged scream, Miss Fong spilled backwards. Solo jumped on top of her. He tried to wrestle the gun from her hand. Her long, unpainted nails tore bloody channels down his cheek.

The girl heaved from side to side to roll him off. She was incredibly strong. Solo clamped both hands on her gun wrist. Miss Fong twisted hard. The muzzle swung around, aimed at Solo's rib cage.

Instantly Solo released her and jerked himself away. The abrupt loss of tension threw Miss Fong off balance. Her gun cracked. Two panes of the folded back French doors shattered.

Solo doubled his list. "No lady kicks a gentleman where you kicked me, Miss Fong -" He connected.

Miss Fong's head snapped back and hit the rug. The pistol spurted one more time as her knuckles banged the carpet.

She lay still.

Solo staggered to his feet. It took him only two minutes to arrange the effect he wanted. In one of the bedroom closets he discovered a collection of feminine clothing. The property of one of General Weng's lady friends, perhaps?

Solo chose a black negligee. Then he dumped Miss Fong into the king-size bed, wrapped her in the negligee and drenched the room with a perfume atomizer from the dressing table.

The room reeked with *Essence d'Amour*. Solo glanced at the slumbering THRUSH valkyrie.

"I hope you can explain your loyal, efficient appearance to General Weng after the big blow, sweetie," he said. He kissed his fingertips at her and ran for the door.

Five

On the bustling Hong Kong street outside the plush hotel, Solo merged into the polyglot crowd. He walked briskly for five minutes, trying to organize his thoughts.

As he walked he kept glancing up past the bizarre shop signs with the Chinese characters and English legends side by side. A small cloud had

rolled across the sun. Around him, clipped British accents mingled with singsong dialects in typical midday unconcern.

At an intersection Solo found a rickshaw and hopped in. "Hotel Hong Kong International, chop-chop."

The rickshaw driver set off down the cobbled way at a brisk run. He shrieked and cursed at pedestrians and small European cars which got in his way.

Solo knew he had major trouble on his hands the moment the rickshaw driver pulled into the wide, sweeping semicircular drive of the Hotel Hong Kong International.

The wind had a banshee sound. The sky was virtually black. Electric lights had come on in buildings along the streets. Further down from the hotel, a power line had fallen. A frightened man, hurrying for shelter, ran into it and died in a waterfall of bluish sparks.

Solo ran up to the knot of Crown Colony police at the hotel entrance. He looked like a ghost, but they looked little better.

"- unnatural, that's what it is," one policeman was saying, staring at the sky.

"I have to get in the hotel," Solo said, starting past them.

A revolver was thrust hard into his midsection. The policeman with the bushy red mustache blocked his way.

"No you don't, sir. We have our orders. No persons can be admitted to the International without the proper identity card from the management."

"I lost my identity card!" Solo had to shout to make himself heard above the gale. "My name is Napoleon Solo. I'm an agent of the U.N.C.L.E."

"Be that as it may, no identity card, no admittance. If anyone tries to break into this hotel without identification, we're authorized to shoot. Now sling your hook before we all get killed in this bloody storm."

Solo grabbed the man's sleeve. "You don't understand! The International is going to be destroyed. You have to get the delegates out of there -"

"What delegates?" the policeman bawled.

"The delegates to the Seminar on Asian Cultural Resources."

The policeman's shout was emphatic: "Never heard of it. Now I warn you, move along -"

"But this storm is being manufactured!" Solo yelled over the din of rain and wind.

"Balmy!" the officer exclaimed. "I knew it the minute I spied you mixing it up with Charlie Luke. This bloke's a drunk or a hophead or worse, lads. Let's give him the
heave-ho!"

"Wait, wait, dammit, you don't understand! My name is Napoleon -"

With a thud Solo landed on the cobbles at the foot of the drive.

He came up like an angry animal, his temper raw because the fools wouldn't pay attention. He took an impulsive step toward the half dozen policemen who had assisted in his departure. All at once the strain showed on their faces. They drew guns.

The ring of police pistols hemmed Solo in. A hissing lightning bolt sent weird blue fires dancing in reflection along the gun muzzles.

The mustached officer said, "Be of, now, or we'll shoot you where you stand."

For one crazy moment, Solo wanted to wade in. Then reason checked him. He whirled and raced across the street.

A few stragglers fled past him. Portions of a roof went sailing over his head. On the fifth floor of the International several windows blew out with great explosions of glass.

The very street under his feet seemed to rock as the force of the storm increased.

Soaked and shivering, Solo darted into the comparative cover of the devastated fried eel restaurant. He pulled out the pocket communicator and pressed the concealed spring stud which opened the secret control panel. With the communicator close to his face, Solo said:

"Open Channel D."

It was the last resort. In a moment, a clear, controlled voice from the box said, "This is Alexander Waverly speaking."

"Solo, sir. I'm in Hong Kong, and -"

"Solo! Great heavens, man! I thought you had been killed."

"No sir. It's Illya. He was captured while I escaped from Tibet. THRUSH has probably put him to death by now, along with our contacts there who -"

"Mr. Solo," Waverly interrupted, "what is that dreadful racket? I can barely hear you."

"Just a bit of rain we're having," Solo's face was harsh. The street ran with rivers of rainwater now, rainwater which carried debris and now and then a pitiful human
corpse.

Solo explained what had happened. He concluded, "The THRUSH storm generator is working perfectly. But I don't know where Weng has set it up. I can't get past the police to warn the delegates at the conference. Is there an U.N.C.L.E. man inside the International? I could call him with the communicator if I knew the frequency -"

Solo's last hope faded as Mr. Waverly said, "We have no agents inside the hotel. We were relying upon you and Mr. Kuryakin. Forget the hotel, Mr. Solo. The repercussions of this can be far greater than simply the

destruction of the conference. You must find the storm generator and smash it."

"But it could be anywhere in Hong Kong. It could take hours. By then -"

"Find the generator, Mr. Solo!"

Rain lashed from the inky sky and dribbled down Napoleon Solo's face. He stared a moment at the small box cupped in his hand. Mr. Waverly was asking the impossible. Unfortunately only the impossible could save Hong Kong from annihilation.

More windows burst. On a high balcony a frantic guest slipped on a terrace, hit the railing, spilled over and fell, howling. Down the street the entire wall of a brick warehouse caved in under the wind's pounding.

The crackle of Mr. Waverly's voice pulled him to his senses:

"Mr. Solo? Do you hear me? Find the generator."

"Acknowledge," Solo said. He pressed the button which silenced the communicator.

He leaped forward as he heard a grinding sound overhead. He landed face first in the torrent of water filling the street. A few feet behind him the facade of the building had given way, and dumped several tons of wood and masonry onto the spot where he had been standing.

He'd acknowledged Mr. Waverly's command. But where in the maelstrom did he start'? He staggered up and said under his breath, "The incredible we do in five minutes. The impossible takes a little longer."

Slipping, stumbling, Solo began to run back in the general direction of the hotel where he had left Miss Fong unconscious. Weng had told him that she did not know the transmitter's location. Had he lied? Solo doubted it. THRUSH discipline regarding secrets was both inflexible and uniform. Lower echelons were kept in the dark.

Still, Miss Fong was his only hope.

All around him buildings collapsed, fallen power lines hissed, people shrieked in fear. And despite the rain, fires were breaking out. Solo ran until his lungs ached.

He had gone only a few blocks when his pocket communicator began to beep frantically.

Act IV: "It Never Rains But It Pours…"

So far Dr. Dargon had been unusually cooperative. This indicated to Illya that the scientist intended to betray them at the first opportunity.

Illya was tense. The slightest odd sound or innocent-appearing shadow brought cold sweat to his forehead.

Dr. Dargon had led them through a series of maze-like passages. They had climbed three stairways and ridden two elevators. In between sucks at his tooth, Dargon kept assuring Illya that he was showing them the only safe escape route. Consequently, the further they went without detection, the more Illya became convinced that Dargon was attempting to lull him into false security.

It had taken them nearly half an hour to wind their way upward to this brilliantly lit corridor with gray cinder block walls.

"Only a short distance more," D argon whispered.

"And then we fall through a trap door into a pit of ravenous bears?" Illya asked.

Dr. Dargon's hands fluttered near his waist. "No, no, I assure you -"

"Please spare me your assurances," Illya cut in. "Where is the hangar?"

Dargon indicated blue steel doors in the distance. "Just through there."

They moved ahead. Mei walked close to Illya on his left side. Her pretty face showed the ravages of fatigue and pain.

"Mr. Kuryakin, do you think you can fly the airplane the doctor told you about?" she said.

Illya shrugged. "He described it as a Nova Class IV two-jet fighter-bomber. I have had some training with that type of aircraft. Enough to give it a try, anyway. While I'm at the controls you will have to watch our guide."

The girl paled. With some weariness, Illya said, "For heaven's sake why are you trembling?"

"I - I have never been in an airplane before."

He didn't bother to tell Mei that he had been boasting about his flying ability. He could pilot smaller planes under reasonably normal circumstances. He had not taken over the Air Pan-Asia jet because of the weather, and his lack of formal training on huge commercial aircraft. He quite possibly might crack them all up on one of the Himalayas, provided they got that far.

"We'll come out of this all right," he reassured the girl. "I'll use the plane's radio to call Hong Kong and warn those at the conference to evacuate the Hotel International. There are many people depending on us, Mei. We have to come through."

Kuryakin, he thought to himself, you are a shameless liar.

Dr. Dargon had reached the blue steel doors. He turned around. Ceiling lights flared off the lenses of his spectacles.

"I can offer no guarantee that the aircraft will be in the hangar, Mr. Kuryakin."

"For your longevity's sake," Illya said, "I hope it is. Please go ahead."

With a bob of his head Dr. Dargon extended his hands in front of him, as if to use his palms to push the door open. His gesture brought instant

pandemonium.

Sirens and bells went off. Illya was getting rather used to the racket by now. Sections of cinder block wall pivoted back and the impersonal lenses of television cameras began scanning the corridor. Illya gave Dargon a smack in the back of the head with the captured pistol.

"You filthy double-crosser! I didn't see you touch anything -"

Dr. Dargon giggled. "The detectors concealed in the frame of these steel doors are extremely sensitive. They detect even heat emitted by human bodies. Thus the slightest change in corridor temperature activates the alarms. No physical contact is necessary for -
down here! *Save me*!" Dargon squealed, glancing past Illya.

THRUSH had appeared at the corridor's far end. Illya dragged Dargon around in front of him to serve as a shield. He squeezed off a shot at the officer in the lead of the pack. It was Major Otako.

Illya's bullet missed. The major flattened against the wall. His S-scar shone with pallid ugliness. Illya said over his shoulder, "Try the door, Mei."

After a moment he heard her say, "It is locked." Panic edged into her voice.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot! It's I, Dargon!" the scientist cried, struggling in Illya's grip.

Major Otako seemed unconcerned that the THRUSH intellectual was currently serving as Illya's shield. Otako wigwagged with his swagger stick. "What are you waiting for, men? Fill the old gas-bag with bullets if necessary. His work is done. I want the U.N.C.L.E. agents."

Savagely Illya tightened the crook of his left arm around Dargon's neck. "Well, Doctor," he snarled, "they have as few scruples as you. So we'll all die together, unless you know how to open this door."

Dargon thought it over only for a second. "The - the middle hinge. It contains a removable section. Inside you will find a small button."

Mei bent over the hinge. Illya squeezed off two more shots. They tore holes in the cinderblocks but missed Otako. The THRUSH soldiers had formed two ranks. The ones in the first were kneeling, aiming their rifles. Illya felt a tug on his robe. He turned and leaped through the door, pulling Dr. Dargon with him as a volley of shots ripped into the wall around the opened door.

Illya and Dargon sprawled on oil-stained concrete. Illya jumped up. He dragged Dargon by the collar. Their shadows sprang out before them in the huge hangar. Behind, Otako screamed frenzied orders.

The fuselage door of the Nova IV fighter-bomber stood open. A mechanic poked his head out. He yelled as the party of three escapees came pelting toward him.

The mechanic tore a pistol from his coverall pocket. Illya shot. The mechanic dropped out of the fuselage door and thudded on the cement.

"Inside, and don't stand on ceremony," Illya said. He shoved the flailing Dargon up to the fuselage door and gave him a kick aft to help him along. Then he spun around and fired a shot which felled a THRUST soldier.

Major Otako was urging his men forward. He had found a submachine gun which he was leveling at Illya as the latter boosted Mei into the plane and scrambled after her.

A second after Illya closed the hatch, bullets began to ping their way along the skin of the aircraft. No holes appeared. Evidently THRUSH had built well, using some armored alloy.

Illya tossed the gun to Mei and indicated Dargon. "As the major put it so eloquently - if he moves, fill the old gas-bag with bullets."

He raced for the cockpit. Bullets spanged and thudded against the cockpit windows as Illya dropped into the bucket, ran his eye down the controls. He hit two of the labeled switches. The wide corrugated steel door of the hangar immediately began to grind aside on a motorized track.

The cockpit windows now displayed several star-marks from the impact of bullets. By peering through these, Illya could make out the THRUSH soldiers ringing the plane, pumping shots at it relentlessly. Major Otako looked irate. He actually trembled. Illya threw switches with desperate haste.

Outside, Otako tossed aside the gun in disgust. Signaling several others to follow him, he disappeared.

The Nova IV fighter-bomber was a huge, sleek craft with an immense V-swept wing. The plane's two powerful jet engines were located at the tail. Illya found the controls for switching these on. He did not do so immediately. Instead he followed the pre-flight check list, a small card hanging above the instrument panel.

Never before, Illya supposed, had the check been done so fast. Slap, slap, snap, snap. He threw switches practically without looking at them. He hoped he was hitting all the right ones. At last he ignited the jet engines and felt the Nova IV strain forward.

He took the controls, swallowing hard. The Nova IV began to roll toward the black field. At last the hangar doors passed out of sight behind.

Illya increased taxiing speed. Mei had come up behind him. Dr. Dargon slumped limply against the cockpit wall. His expression indicated that he had abandoned nearly all hope. Illya sent the plane racing toward the sharp turn onto the main runway, where parallel lines of blue beacon lights along the runway's edge led oil into the darkness and the point of no return.

Abruptly the cockpit was splashed with light. Powerful searchlights from the headquarters buildings crisscrossed the field. Mei shrieked low and pointed behind her.

Out the starboard window Illya saw an open military vehicle rolling alongside the plane, careening and veering to keep pace. The THRUSH driver looked petrified. Legs braced wide apart, Major Otako stood in the vehicle's rear. His fingers were locked on the handgrips of a peculiar

weapon on a swivel mount. The weapon resembled a conventional machine gun except for the bright metal coils twisted around the barrel.

Otako's mouth worked. His face was contorted with hatred. Though Illya could not hear the sound above the roar of the jets, he knew Otako was shrieking at the driver, ordering him to keep up with the taxiing jet. Illya measured the distance to the turn onto the runway. Still a good way to go –

From the tip of the coil weapon in the THRUSH vehicle leaped a blood-colored thread of light. It struck the fuselage of the Nova IV and the cockpit glowed scarlet. "Laser cannon," Illya cried to Mei. "Get down!"

The beam of ruby light pierced the fuselage wall inches behind Illya's head. The way the jet was jouncing, he might be jarred back into that destructive beam at any moment.

He knew the Nova IV would never reach the main runway with Otako operating the laser device from the vehicle racing alongside. He said a brief, wordless prayer and hit the controls.

The fighter-bomber's giant tires smoked and squealed as the brakes locked. At the same time Illya swung the plane sharply around to the left, almost heeling it over on its nose. But the effect was achieved.

The heated gasses flowing out of the rear jets with tornadic force were aimed directly across the taxi strip. The THRUSH vehicle could not stop in time. Major Otako shrieked as the vehicle plowed into the streams of heat and fire from the afterburners. There was a sudden, dull explosion that rocked the plane.

Even before the first sound waves hit his ear, Illya was attacking the controls again. Like a drunken bird the Nova IV zigzagged back on course.

Illya wheeled it hard left. The parallel blue lights stretched ahead. He poured on the power and the fighter-bomber picked up speed.

Glancing back, Illya saw a fireball consuming the remains of the THRUSH vehicle and, he trusted, of Major Otako.

Suddenly a sheet of flame gouted skyward from the middle of the runway just ahead. Illya grappled with the controls. He ran the Nova IV off the concrete, around the flame and back again, still maintaining speed. One or two more spectacular booby traps of that type went off before the blue lights blurred into streaks at either side of the cockpit, and the Nova IV lifted into flight.

Illya gulped for air. "Mei? Are you still with me'? I have to watch the controls carefully. Our speed is very fast, and the radar shows the peaks are very high all around here."

Mei's voice came faint, "I am here, Mr. Kuryakin. You - you are a brave man."

In the process of leaning the fighter-bomber into a steep bank to the left, Illya positively glowed.

"Thank you for the compliment, my dear. Now if I can only get the landing gear up and locked away, we'll be off for Hong Kong. Where the devil are the switches? This cockpit is dark as - oh, here we go."

He pressed several studs in succession. The Nova IV continued to climb for a few seconds. It was still banking to the left, giving Illya an excellent view of the ground. He made out the runway lights and the spill from several open doors in the headquarters buildings. Suddenly the jet rocked. Up from the ground boiled balls of green-shot flame.

Illya bent over to peer. "This is very embarrassing."

"What's wrong?" Mei asked.

"Those weren't the landing gear controls. I had no idea this plane would be fully armed with - oh, well. It's one less nuisance for U.N.C.L.E. to worry about. Now we shall -"

Mei shrieked. A white wall loomed dead ahead. "The mountains!"

Illya jerked the controls.

The Nova IV went arrowing almost straight up, clearing the snowy white face of the crag by a slim margin.

"No more conversation," Illya said. "Not until we're safely out of this wilderness."

And with the help of several additional dim lamps which Mei found and switched on, he managed to zigzag a course between the frozen peaks gleaming white and savage under the Himalayan stars.

In about fifteen minutes he had plotted a flight plan to Hong Kong. He hoped the altitude would be sufficient to avoid any Red Chinese interceptors. The jets murmured steadily. Great banks of clouds rolled along in the chill moonlight beneath them.

"We'll never reach Hong Kong in time," he said. "I must radio the authorities."

In the glow from the dash instruments, Illya's face looked wan and weary. "It's no use," he said. "I can't raise anyone."

A noise disturbed him. It was the crazed sound of Dr. Dargon sucking on his tooth.

"General Weng has succeeded! The storm generator is operating in Hong Kong. That is why you cannot contact any regular radio installation. You have failed Mr. Kuryakin; you have failed utterly. Isn't that splendid?"

Illya twisted around and almost hit Dargon on the jaw. The man was so damnably triumphant!

Dargon cringed back against the starboard instrument console to avoid the blow. Illya's face turned red. With a feeling of humiliation he pulled back his fist.

Dargon blinked. His spectacle lenses reflected the cockpit lights so that his eyes seemed to be holes through which tiny, different-colored fireflies could be seen. He tittered.

Illya cursed silently. To strike Dargon would be to admit that the evil organization had succeeded. Dargon realized this. Hence his amusement. Illya silently pummeled his mind for an answer.

In a moment he had one. Carefully he composed his face for the bluff.

"Well, Dargon, I suppose you are correct."

"Yes, it will be impossible for you to establish communication with Hong Kong."

Carefully Illya slid his hand down to the thick folds of his lama robe. His fingers probed until he found what he wanted. In the dark he moved his hand back from his knee.

"So we could not alert the proper authorities as to General Weng's whereabouts even if we wished," he said, trying to sound as dolorous as possible. "Where does he have the unit set up, by the way?"

"On a junk in the harbor. It is a large vessel with a black storm cloud painted on its sail. Quite appropriate."

"In a grisly way," Illya said. "The harbor, eh? Did you select the site?"

"Experimental meteorological studies led us to the conclusion that the harbor basin in the vicinity of Smiling Fish Quay would facilitate the widest sweep for the generator, and afford maximum destruction of the area surrounding the Hotel International."

"I like a man who knows his subject,'" Illya grinned. "Thank you very much, Doctor." He pulled the pocket communicator from his robe, depressing the appropriate stud.

Dargon's eyes seemed to swell behind his lenses. "There is nothing you can do with the information, Kuryakin. Radio contact with Hong Kong is impossible. You said as much. I heard for myself -"

Uncertainty put a catch in Dargon's tone. He licked his lips.

"You're quite correct, Doctor," Illya said. "I cannot establish contact with the Hong Kong authorities by using the radio transmitter in this aircraft. And by the time we land in the Crown Colony, the damage will be done. U.N.C.L.E. however, has thoughtfully provided these little communicators, which your Tibetan cohorts did not discover when they searched me."

Illya showed Dargon the small box-like affair. "It's power is startling, Doctor. And its anti-interference properties are excellent. Let's see what we can do with your tidbits via our headquarters. Watch him carefully, Mei." Then, into the communicator: "Open Channel D, please. Extreme urgent priority."

Following several wheeps and crackles, a familiar voice said, "Waverly here."

"This is Kuryakin, sir."

For once, Waverly did not sound phlegmatic. "Mr. Kuryakin! This is incredible."

"At forty thousand feet above Red China in a THRUSH aircraft, I am inclined to agree."

"I thought you were dead, Mr. Kuryakin."

Illya's Words raced ahead of his thoughts: "It's Napoleon, sir. He's the one who didn't make it. General Weng of THRUSH captured him and I'm afraid he - I'm dead?"

"Mr. Kuryakin, evidently there has been a breakdown of communications between you and your cohort." Waverly cleared his throat, "Only moments ago I spoke with Mr. Solo in Hong Kong. He informed me THRUSH had liquidated you. Mr. Solo is attempting to find and destroy the THRUSH Weather generator, which is already causing a storm of catastrophic proportions. A difficult task, since we don't know where it is."

Illya allowed himself a grin. "Sir, I know the whereabouts of the generator. I can't raise Hong Kong on the plane's radio but I should be able to contact Napoleon on the communicator. I thought that he had been -"

"Brevity is the soul of survival for Hong Kong, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly interrupted. "We shall open and clear all channels at once. I suggest that you get busy relaying your information to Mr. Solo."

"At once," Illya said, thumbing off the D band. Simultaneously, Dr. Dargon began to burble and bleat:

"Gulled! Gulled and deceived! You'll pay for tricking me -!"

Before Illya could whip round to fend him off, Dargon fastened his hands on Illya's throat and at the same time thrust forward with all his strength.

Illya tore at the fingers biting the flesh of his neck. Dargon slammed Illya's head against the instrument panel. Various switches and controls were knocked out of adjustment. Warning lights blazed and blinked. The fighter-bomber began to veer and tilt downward toward the cloud bank.

Illya struggled. Dargon was panting like an enraged bull. He pounded Illya's head against the console with a thud, and another, and another.

The edges of Illya's mind grew stained with darkness. The fighter-bomber was into a dive, its altitude dropping alarmingly. Once more Illya tried to rip the murdering fingers from his neck but couldn't get a grip on them. His mind was getting fuzzier by the second…

Two

Another power line came whipping down like an electrified snake, directly in Napoleon Solo's path.

Blue fire danced and hissed over huge puddles of water. Solo jerked back from the puddle into which he had almost skidded.

Two ambulances passed at the next intersection, sirens going at full. One raced on out of sight. A mammoth gust of wind picked up the other and drove it into the wall of a building where it crashed and burst into flames.

Solo staggered into the cover of a shop front, which was already beginning to totter. He pulled the frantically beeping pocket communicator from his sodden shirt.

"Mr. Waverly?" he shouted into the box, "I haven't had time to find it yet -"

"If you would kindly stop bellowing, Napoleon," said a tinny voice, "I know where you can locate the generator."

"Illya! Where are you?"

"Sitting with a headache in a THRUSH airplane. Never mind that. I thought you were dead."

"I thought you were dead."

"The reports of our deaths have been greatly exaggerated. Dr. Dargon told me the location of the generator because he thought it was impossible for me to communicate with Hong Kong. I called Waverly on the communicator. He said that you had escaped Weng's tender mercies. I was in the process of calling you when Dargon tried to throttle me. I apologize for the delay, but it took Mei a minute or so to work up enough nerve to put a bullet into Dargon's stomach. He has designed his last unpleasant device for THRUSH."

More citizens went streaming by in the torrential rain. Their screams of fear trailed behind them. Solo said, "The city can't last much longer in this storm. Where's the generator?"

In thirty seconds Solo had left the shop front a block behind. It promptly collapsed.

A bolt of lightning lit the rain-swept foot of Smiling Fish Quay. The air smelled of ozone and decayed fish. Solo went sliding and skidding along

the drenched cobbles to the quay's edge.

The only human being in sight was a fisherman kneeling in a cul-de-sac a few yards away. He was praying to be spared from the impromptu typhoon. Solo bent over. His back kept the rain off Miss Fong's pistol, which he pulled from his belt and checked.

The lightning fizzled into darkness. Thunder pealed so loudly it hurt his ears. Visually Solo tried to sort out the hundreds of wildly pitching junks and sampans moored in this part of the harbor. No lights showed anywhere, except on the distant mainland where they gleamed dimly through the driving rain.

Solo jumped aboard the nearest sampan, which was damaged, but still afloat.

It lurched terrifically under him. A monster wave washed over the deck and nearly pitched him into the water. The rain was coming at him almost horizontally because of the wind's force.

Lightning flared. Solo spotted a whopping sail on a half-broken mast. The sail displayed a large, crudely painted storm cloud. The craft was the third vessel beyond the one on which he was fighting for balance.

With big leaps Solo crossed the nautical stepping stones. He had to grab ropes or a mast as he landed on each boat, because the decks were tilting back and forth through an arc of almost ninety degrees.

The distance between the sampan and the junk with the torn storm-cloud sail was a good seven to eight feet. Besides, the sampan was tilting violently. So was the junk. Solo waited until he thought his timing was right. Then, gun in his right hand, he jumped.

He missed. A wave rolled the junk back out of the way.

Solo hit the water and went down, thrashing and flailing, into the customary waterside Hong Kong garbage.

The moored junk tossed back toward him and the hull smacked him in the head. Dazed, Solo grabbed the rail.

He tossed his right leg up and pulled himself aboard. Bits of refuse clung to him. A stream of water ran out of the barrel of his now useless pistol.

Two-thirds of the junk's deck was covered with a bamboo framework over which a tarpaulin had been draped. Inside the improvised deckhouse a spot of amber light glowed and wavered. Solo crept forward.

The deck pitched again. Solo fought for balance. He fell, making a loud, hollow thud during a lull in the thunder.

Part of the tarpaulin whipped aside. An ugly Oriental in a mud-spotted white suit thrust the muzzle of a big pistol into the dark. Beyond the man, Solo glimpsed General Weng's heaving bulk and the black generator box. Its sides glowed with red highlights from a
small charcoal brazier.

"I do not see anyone -" the gunman began. Solo's shoulder hit him in the belly.

Solo and the gunman careened inside the tarp shelter. General Weng leaped up from a packing box. He wore the sinister switch-belt around his waist. A faint hum rose from the generator box. Solo saw all this in a wild blur as he went crashing to the slick deck.

The gunman leaped and landed, knocking the wind out of him. The gunman fastened one hand on Solo's throat and, gun in the other, took aim.

Solo brought his own gun hand lashing up behind the THRUSH agent's head. He cracked the man over his left ear. The agent made a loud, gulping sound. His grip loosened momentarily. Solo rammed his knee into the THRUSH agent's groin and lifted him off.

As Solo lurched to his feet, General Weng struggled to pull out a pistol. The gunman was up again too, aiming at Solo from behind. Solo spun and flung his useless gun.

It smacked the agent's nose. Solo had a split second to find another weapon.

He saw one, its point embedded in the top of a crude fisherman's bench. Solo's water-slicked hand closed around the haft of the scaling knife. He jerked it loose. The agent fired.

Solo tried to dodge. The bullet slammed into his left shoulder. But his right hand was already swinging in a killing aim. The serrated edge of the knife grazed the agent's throat like a caress. The man shrieked as blood flowed down over his lapels from the fatal slash in his neck.

Solo caught the gunman's pistol as it fell from slack fingers. General Weng was breathing in asthmatic panic. His cheeks gleamed with sweat and his eyes with murder. He had gotten his gun out. He chattered lurid obscenities as he fired.

His bullet took Solo hard in the left thigh. Blood soaked Solo's trousers instantly. His leg throbbed and weakened to the point where he could not stand. He felt the leg collapsing under him as he triggered the shot that caught Weng in the breastbone.

With an elephantine bay Weng fell over backwards, his shirt red. Solo lay on the slick deck, panting. His whole left pants leg was soggy with blood.

Weng propped himself on hands and knees. He aimed his pistol at Solo while his eyes wedged down into tiny pain-wracked slits. Solo flopped over on his belly. He braced his right forearm with his left hand to steady his aim. He centered the muzzle on the middle of Weng's forehead.

Thunder crashed in the sky. Another wave hit the junk's hull and sloshed under the edge of the tarpaulin. Most of the coals in the charcoal brazier were extinguished by the spray. A few still flickered but the interior of the tarpaulin shelter was dim. Random spots of light illuminated Weng's pained face. The adversaries held each other at gunpoint.

"Standoff, Mr. Solo," Weng wheezed. "Though perhaps I will get the better of it yet."

Muzzle to muzzle, the men lay on the deck as the storm roared. Solo's lips peeled back from his teeth. "Turn off the switch, General. Turn it off unless you want one more bullet in your fat hide."

Weng gasped for air. A spasm, of pain shuddered his blubber. "I can kill you while you kill me, Mr. Solo."

"Very true," Solo panted. The pain in his left leg was maddening. He felt dizzy. "But you aren't really sure whether that bullet in your chest has already put a period after everything, are you? Maybe you want to take a chance. Maybe - you want to find out whether a police surgeon can patch you up. You kill me and I kill you and neither of us finds out. That's the way the hand looks to me, General." Solo bit his lower lip as his leg flamed with heat and hurt. "I said turn off the switch, General."

At last Weng coughed, "Yes. Yes. The will to live remains. You win."

With one hand he threw his gun across the shelter. It fell sloshing in water. With his other hand he flicked the switch on the belt. Solo let the muzzle of his own gun drop. He pushed himself up to his feet.

General Weng struggled and heaved, managing to sit up with his back resting against one of the tarpaulin supports. He lifted the blood-soaked lapel of his suit, felt gingerly beneath it. His paunch heaved slowly. Weng's face became crafty.

"I still maintain, Mr. Solo, that U.N.C.L.E. personnel are naive. Step around here on my side of the generator box, please. Fine. I trust that you can see the stenciling on the box? Can you also recognize the language?"

Beneath his feet, Solo could feel the deck heaving less violently. The thunder was less ear-splitting than before. He bent to examine the white stenciling. He stood up again, one hand braced on the generator so that he wouldn't fall.

"The stencil identifies the generator as the property of one of the governments meeting at the Hotel International. That's exactly according to

your plan. But when U.N.C.L.E. turns the generator over to the proper authorities, your little flim-flam will be exposed. I'm afraid all that blood you've lost has weakened your logic, General."

"Not at all, not - at all." Weng coughed. "You see, Mr. Solo, we return to the subject of naiveté. You believe you have convinced me that I have a remote chance to survive the impact of your bullet. I am more realistic. I am dying. However -"

With incredible speed Weng's fat yellow hand jerked out from beneath his black-bloody lapel. He cracked a football-shaped plastic capsule with his thumbnail. Sparks and smoke boiled. Weng tossed the capsule onto the deck. Blinding white tongues of flame leaped from it.

"That thermal device, Mr. Solo, will destroy the junk, water-soaked as she is. It will destroy my corpse along with yours. But the metallurgical materials incorporated into this belt and the generating unit, the tremendous heat will not harm them. The components will be found, their stencils intact. THRUSH will achieve its goal of touching off an armed conflict, even though you and I are not present to witness it."

Weng cocked his sweat-shining head. "Listen, Mr. Solo. The rain has diminished. It will soon stop altogether. But the storm has just begun."

Solo snatched up a bucket lying beside the fisherman's bench, filled it with some of the water sloshing over the deck, flung the water on the fire. The white, sparking mass was barely affected. The soaked tarpaulin caught. White fire-tendrils raced upward. Solo dove to fill another bucket.

A huge hole appeared in the top of the tarpaulin. The smoky-white flames ate their way to the mast and began to climb higher. As Solo flung the second bucket, everything blurred. His left leg was giving out.

The decking was afire. General Weng's trousers were afire. The fisherman's bench was afire. But the generator remained untouched, unharmed. Solo fell again. This time he couldn't rise. His leg and shoulder wounds combined to make him helpless.

The white fire boiled around him. Its heat made his skin crawl.

"Farewell, Mr. Solo," General Weng said through the smoke. His eyelids were nearly closed, life nearly gone from his body. "I would suggest that we exchange greetings—in hell - except for the fact that I - shall not be joining you there. Hell is - reserved for failures. I have – succeeded -" With a vast shudder of his paunch, Weng died.

Solo lay blinded with pain on the deck. His right pants leg was sending up shoots of smoke. He had to save himself to tell the true story of the storm generator. With almost his last remnant of strength, he took the deadly belt and managed to put it on.

The junk was burning like matchwood. All around, the white brilliance leaped and crackled. Solo knew it was the windup. "Weng was right. THRUSH would achieve its malevolent ends after all.

Dazed, he fortunately remembered the THRUSH pistol which he still held in his right hand. He gaped at it a moment. He groaned in pain as he flopped over on his stomach, aimed below the waterline and emptied the pistol into the hull.

A bit of orange peel floated in through the small hole his clustered shots had opened. Some of the fire fizzled out. Solo began pummeling at the edges of the hole. In a minute he had made an opening the size of his fist. More water poured in.

The junk began to list. Water rolled over the gunwale. The junk was sinking.

Solo paddled from beneath the edge of the burned tarpaulin, using one leg and one arm. He managed to reach the mooring line of a nearby sampan. He got the line around his waist so that he would not sink.

The junk disappeared from view, carrying the storm generator and Weng's corpse to the bottom of the harbor.

Thus tethered, semi-helpless, yet somehow alive and conscious, it was as though little incidents, usually unnoticed, came into sharper, more vivid focus.

Solo saw a head emerge from over the taffrail of a crazily bobbing sampan, not twenty feet away. A saffron face, mouth open in surprise, looked solemnly into his, rolled its eyes in abject terror, and disappeared.

Half delirious, Solo laughed. "Can't blame the silly fellow," he said to the empty waves. "I really am not at my best. Lucky Bernice can't see me now."

For some reason, the idea seemed very funny to him. Bernice, who shuddered with distaste if a single lock of her auburn hair got out of place!

As if to bring him back to the unpleasant present, a large and fragrant bit of offal floated past his face.

High above him, in the city itself, he could see that a large cornice on the roof of the Continental had torn loose and was hanging and was swinging precariously over the street. One of the new apartment projects was afire. Through the smoke, as though framed in some nightmare, he saw a man, pajama coat flapping in the wind, poise on an upper windowsill and jump, turning slowly end over end as he plummeted down.

The end of some poor devil. He wondered what the fellow was thinking as he saw his end rushing up to meet him. Probably nothing. For a man to do the Dutch act, forces stronger than conscious thought would have torn his brain away from any semblance of reality, so that fear retreated, and nothing remained but the dreadful certainty of the thing that he must do.

Someone was groaning softly. With a shrug of distaste, Solo realized that it was he who was making the noise.

He grinned bleakly up at the storm-tossed sky.

Waverly had always said that he, Solo, had a bit of madness in him.

This would make the old devil suck on his pipe and nod, all right.

Then, so gradually that he was not even aware of it, conscious thought went away, and only half dreams remained. Finally those too went away…

A harbor patrol boat discovered him bobbing unconscious among the orange peels an hour later.

Three

String music filled the candlelit room. The room was intimate, paneled in wine velvet. A rich curtain of the same material isolated. it from the remainder of the restaurant. Across the stubs of the candles which had burned down during the meal, Illya Kuryakin took Mei's hand.

"It's been a delight to dine with you, my dear." Illya kissed her hand in his best continental manner. "Especially here in Hong Kong, with the city relatively intact, the generator recovered by U.N.C.L.E., and those two antagonistic countries back to the conference table. I must say you look radiant."

"Only because you have been kind enough to show me so many new and wonderful things these last few days," Mei said.

A remarkable change had come over the Tibetan girl. She had adopted a Western wardrobe. Her lustrous dark hair was done up in the latest bouffant style. She looked quite sophisticated and gorgeous. Rather maliciously, Illya decided he was glad Napoleon was still confined to the hospital.

Mei sipped the last of her wine. She glanced at him warmly. "I never believed we would live through it all. You showed such amazing courage."

"Well," Illya said, "I hate to sound stuffy about it, but it is nice of you to admit that someone else besides my dear friend Na -"

The curtains whooshed back. Dapperly dressed, Napoleon Solo grinned down at them.

"Someone mention my name?"

He walked with a slight limp, hut his arm was out of the cast. He whipped the curtains together behind him and pulled a chair over.

"That doctor is a gentleman. He didn't want to release me yet. But when I told him I wouldn't miss this party for the world, he listened to reason. Well, here we are, the three of us again. Mei, you're ravishing." He patted her arm.

The girl's eyes glowed. Illya raised his napkin to hide a dyspeptic expression.

Solo rubbed his hands together. "What's on the menu? I'm starved. I would have been here sooner -"He reached for the wine bottle "- but it's raining outside. From natural causes, I'm happy to report."

Solo stopped in the act of pouring. "You know, I completely forgot. Mr. Waverly signaled the hospital to see if I knew where you were. He wants to talk to you right away. I think it'd be better if you stepped outside. Sometimes the communicator does make a lot of noise."

Jaw rigid, Illya rose. "Very well. But I'll be back."

"No need to hurry."

Solo turned to Mei and looked deep into her eyes. She seemed mesmerized.

"Mei," he said, "listen to a great idea. I have a few weeks' vacation due, the wounds and all, and I was wondering whether we could use that time to get you ready for a beauty contest coming up in the States. I think you'd be sensational as Miss Free Tibet -"

The curtain rings gave an angry clatter as Illya Kuryakin left. Napoleon Solo kept right on talking.